

## “Before I race I get my eyeliner straight and do my hair:” postfeminism and Victoria Pendleton

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“BEFORE A RACE I GET MY EYELINER PERFECT AND DO MY HAIR”:  
POSTFEMINISM AND VICTORIA PENDLETON

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At the 2012 World Track Cycling Championships in Melbourne, Victoria Pendleton regained the championship title she conceded to Australian rival Anna Meares the previous year. Following a dramatic fall mid-competition, Pendleton was said to have displayed “true grit” in recovering to win (William Fotheringham 2012), and confirmed her status as one of the foremost female cyclists of her generation. Conversely, in the years between her Olympic gold medal victories at Beijing in 2008 and the forthcoming London games, Pendleton has become more commonly associated with her appearance, and, more specifically, the particular feminine grooming rituals she undertakes both in preparing to race and in her self-branding as an athlete-celebrity. This article examines how Pendleton articulates her femininity in the media, exploring how the feminine beauty rituals she describes form part of the increased currency of post-feminist discourses. Furthermore, building upon existing work on sport feminism, I assess whether Pendleton’s grooming regime may be regarded as an oppositional technology of the self to resist the cultural construct of the muscular female body that has come to be synonymous with women’s athletic achievement.

Media coverage of Pendleton frequently notes the contrast between her “girly image” and the militaristic training regime required of a professional athlete (Oliver Adams 2011). Indeed, in a profile for The Daily Telegraph, Oliver Adams (2011) expresses surprise as Pendleton hauls an unfathomable load – twice her body weight – over her head, despite the necessity for weight training in sprint events being common knowledge. Adams can perhaps be forgiven his astonishment, since the self-styled “glamour girl of British cycling” (Miranda Bryant 2011) states that perfecting her hair and make-up immediately before a race allows her to relax into the mental state required to win an event (Dan Jones 2011). Tellingly, Pendleton contrasts these feminine grooming rituals with the more typically athletic training she undertakes months beforehand, commenting that while necessary, training alone cannot guarantee her success. Rather, she believes that ensuring her hair is straightened, eyelashes curled, and nails varnished, is crucial to achieving a mental state primed for victory. Detailing her training in the press then, Pendleton prioritises the feminine labour of beauty over the typical athletic ardours of training, endurance and stamina.

Of course, Pendleton is far from the only British female Olympian to have traded on her femininity. Certainly, pentathlete Jessica Ennis and swimmer Keri-Anne Payne have also secured lucrative sponsorship deals with Olay and Max Factor respectively- all brands owned and managed by the Procter and Gamble conglomerate (Olivia Bergin 2012). Given the chronic underfunding of sports, and the increased media attention resulting from the approaching Olympic Games in London, it is perhaps unsurprising that British athletes would want to enjoy the financial support such firms can provide. Nonetheless, the strapline for Payne's Max Factor campaign, "The World is Watching," is revealing for the connection made between the personal and national expectation for athletic success, and women's status as ornamental object of the (male) gaze. Even in this context, where feminine appearance and athletic success are oddly conflated, Pendleton is unusual in agreeing to pose for FHM magazine (a self-styled "lads-mag") in 2009, indicating her willingness to side line her athletic ability and be taken as a glamour figure.

It is possible to locate this new paradigm within the ascent of postfeminist discourses in popular culture. As Angela McRobbie's oft-cited definition tells us, post-feminism is "feminism taken into account...such that the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined" (Angela McRobbie 2004, p. 255). Importantly, under post-feminism, individual female success is valorised over the analysis of macro factors leading to women's social exclusion (see Shelley Budgeon 2011, p. 282). Pendleton's adherence to the tenets of post-feminist individualism is apparent in her transformation in the media, from "equal opportunities crusader" (Daily Mail 2008) demanding that the number of female Olympic track cycling events be equal to the number of races in which her male counterparts participate, to her disassociation with the campaign in an interview in 2011, which she states she was "forced" to lead (Jones 2011).

Requiring strength and explosive power, track cycling is not one of the sports which, emphasising "balance, co-ordination, flexibility and grace," (Jennifer Hargreaves 1994, p. 159) are readily classified as feminine. Nonetheless, Pendleton describes how her femininity distinguished her from her heavier, more muscular track cycling colleagues who had little regard for their appearance. In refusing, to cut her long, dark hair into a more streamlined style and being "too small, too girly" (Jones 2011), Pendleton initially found herself side-lined by coaches and at odds with the aesthetic norms of the sport. In emphasising her individual struggle and distinguishing herself from her fellow female track cyclists, Pendleton once again confirms her status as a post-feminist athlete.

Elsbeth Probyn's "new traditionalism" helps further conceptualise Pendleton's femininity (Elsbeth Probyn 1990, p. 147). Probyn describes how under post-feminism the return to the home and to the traditionally inscribed feminine roles of wife and mother is presented as a free choice (Probyn 1990, p. 149). Thus, Pendleton's athletic career is presented in the shadow of her forthcoming retirement and marriage to her long-term fiancé. Her traditionalism, and its presentation as a choice, is particularly apparent in the athlete's advertising campaign for her recently launched 'vintage-look' bikes for women, for which she posed in 1960s fashions ([Daily Mail](#) 2012). Despite the weight training and endurance that ensure her continued sporting success, Pendleton's media image assures us that she retains "traditional" feminine aspirations.

Adding a further layer of complexity to our analysis of Pendleton's femininity, sport feminists have theorised how sport functions ambivalently for women, both as a technology of the self and as a technology of power (see for instance Pirkko Markula and Richard Pringle (2006); Markula (2003) and Amanda Jones and Cara Carmichael Aitchison (2007)). Markula draws from Michel Foucault's later work on the law and its relationship to the body, where he defines technologies of the self as "practices the permit individuals to effect... a certain number of transformations to their own bodies, thoughts, conduct and ways of being in order to develop or attain new states of happiness, purity, wisdom or empowerment" (Michel Foucault, 1988, quoted in Jones & Carmichael Aitchison 2007, p. 53). These are contrasted with technologies of power, where the individual is disenfranchised as a result of "oppressive regimes of power effected through dominant discourses" (Foucault, 1988, quoted in Jones & Carmichael Aitchison, 2007, p. 53). To illustrate the ambiguities of feminine-coded behaviour for female athletes, Jones and Carmichael Aitchison describe how diet and exercise may function as technologies of power for women who feel subjected to particular discourses of femininity. Those same practices may however, function as technologies of the self for women who aim consciously to transform their bodies in ways that counter that dominant culture (Jones & Aitchison 2007, p. 54).

Hargreaves describes how female muscularity might provide an escape from traditional forms of femininity (Hargreaves 1994, p. 161). Certainly, in discussing how women might engage in technologies of the self through sport, Markula and Carmichael Aitchison primarily intend the muscular female body, which eschews the roles and practices typically allied to femininity. In the case of Pendleton however, the muscular female body has itself become a dominant discursive expectation within the subculture of professional sport. As discussed,

Pendleton claims she was side lined by coaches and athletes alike who, were significantly more muscular. Further, the athlete describes the pressure to conform to a certain corporeal appearance and adhere to an aesthetic regime of using little or no make-up in order to be taken seriously as an athlete (Jones 2011). Examining track cycling more specifically, the sport reduces the athlete to a machine-like instrumentality —~~that~~ that is, the rider is stripped of their individuality ~~and reduced~~ and reduced to an androgynous, robotic extension of the bike. Consequently, it may be possible to construct Pendleton's practices of femininity, and her keenness to discuss it in the media as an oppositional strategy, given she is able both to counter the dominant discourses of female athleticism, and to reclaim a level of individualism that the sport might otherwise deny her.

Analysing Pendleton's feminine beauty practices as technologies of the self is rendered problematic however when we consider the significance of critical self-awareness in Foucault's theorisation. As Markula notes, it is particularly difficult to know the extent of athletes' awareness of discursive constructions of their training regimen (Markula 2003, pp. 104--5). For Pendleton, her opposition to the female muscular body, and an implied attendant masculinity of her fellow athletes, is made clear in her interviews discussing her femininity. Her self-stylisation as a "glamour girl" however, clearly indicates a desire to adhere to an alternative set of dominant discourses. Indeed, embodying the discourses of the glamour model to shun the norms of female sport arguably serves only to replace one set of constraints with another, which is far more restrictive and problematic. To conclude, Victoria Pendleton's widely publicised feminine beauty regime, particularly cited in preparation for a race, is unusual in female (and indeed male) athletes. Her practices might be viewed in the light of the recent rise in currency of postfeminism, which constructs such feminine labour as a matter of individual choice rather than the restrictions characteristic of women as a subaltern group. Conversely, we have explored how Pendleton's feminine labour may be regarded as a technology of the self - a way of liberating herself from the androgynous instrumentality of her sport and of the expectation of female muscularity in women's sport as a whole. Her retirement this year will leave British female track cycling with a role model of world-leading success, and an image of ambivalent post-feminist femininity.

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