

SALLY JENKINS: GRAHAM BLAZED A PATH, SPORTSWOMEN SAW THE LIGHT

By Sally Jenkins
Thursday, July 19, 2001

This isn't strictly about sports. In fact it's only kind of, sort of about sports, because you could tell from the swing of her pearls that Katharine Graham wasn't an athlete, unless you count those weekend tennis games with George Shultz. She was, however, quite meaningful to those women who work or play in or around sports, because they shared a tacit understanding with her, which is that experience of walking into a room full of men and knowing that you aren't entirely welcome. That sort of exclusion exists as much in sports now as it did in the boardroom in 1963.

"Just as men have a bond among teammates, there's a bond among women who recognize other women with the strength to stand up under adversity," says Donna Lopiano, executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation. "They recognize someone who stands up to being muscled."

To understand what Mrs. Graham, whose influence cut across generations and professions, meant to someone like Susan O'Malley, the president of Washington Sports and Entertainment and arguably the most powerful female executive in professional sports, perhaps you have to see O'Malley's office wall, where there is just one photograph of someone outside her immediate family, and it's not Michael Jordan, as one might expect, but rather Mrs. Graham, of whom O'Malley says, "I was like a stalker when she was in the building." Or perhaps you have to hear the note in Billie Jean King's voice when she says, "I admired her. I admired her because she was a woman in a position to make decisions, and there just haven't been many of those."

Mrs. Graham wasn't an athlete nor was she a sports figure and her enthusiasms in this area extended to an occasional trip to Wimbledon and an annual visit with Abe and Irene Pollin at their MCI Center. She was a mother of four and a self-described "doormat wife" and widow who remade herself into the first female head of a Fortune 500 company, the profits of which grew steadily with her self-assurance. "I

adopted the assumption of many of my generation that women were intellectually inferior to men, that we were not capable of governing, leading, managing, anything but our homes and our children," she wrote in her memoir. The gall in that sentence is palpable. And isn't that what women in sports put up with every day?

Let's depart from Mrs. Graham and look at some other formidable women who work desperately hard at what they do despite the fact that it invites hostility and offers not a lot of recompense. Take Lopiano, who has indefatigably defended Title IX from various legal challenges over the years. The Rosetta stone in Lopiano's career is a scar on her thigh. She received it when she was 11, shortly after a grown man invoked a no-girls-allowed rule, even though she was the best player on the field, and denied her a Little League uniform. She stood outside the chain link fence, eating a lollipop on a stick, when a foul ball came sailing out of the park. Lopiano instinctively chased it into the street — where she was hit by a car, the grille of which drove the stick into her thigh.

Now let's dwell for a moment on Pat Summitt, the University of Tennessee basketball coach who has won six national championships. If you want to unlock the mystery of Summitt's fierce personality, you have to envision a dinner table on a tobacco farm in Henrietta, Tenn., at which her three strapping brothers would sit each night while she served them, despite the fact that she had worked alongside them in the field all day. When they wanted iced tea, they would simply raise their glasses wordlessly, without a please or a thank you, and rattle the ice. She would pour.

What did Mrs. Graham have in common with these women? As author and screenwriter Nora Ephron once wrote of her, "her journey from daughter to wife to widow to woman parallels to a surprising degree the history of women in this century." What she shared with them was a ladylike but faintly defiant tilt of her head, the determination not to be bullied. Mrs. Graham had that thing female athletes and activists in women's sports are always trying to acquire, charge of their own arms and legs. Mrs. Graham took

charge of herself.

As Allen H. Neuharth, founder of USA Today, remembers, when Mrs. Graham began attending meetings of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, “she was looked on with distaste by most of the good old boys.” But Mrs. Graham made it clear that “she was a tough competitor and an unhappy loser and had ways of expressing herself that the guys understood.”

Mrs. Graham was interested in other different women, young or old or athletic or not, who had this experience. I have one personal Katharine Graham story, and only one. I was 24 years old and The Washington Post had just hired me, when I happened into a restaurant where Mrs. Graham was dining. She was with a group of people that included an old friend of my family's. The old friend, thinking it would be a good joke, grabbed me by the elbow and introduced me to Mrs. Graham without telling her I was a new employee and forced me to sit down next to her, which I did, scared to death.

Mrs. Graham spoke to me in that patrician voice that former Post sportswriter David Remnick, now the editor of the New Yorker, once described as “sounding, to us, like money.” She asked me what it was I did for a living. “Um, I’m a sportswriter and I’m starting a new job on Monday,” I said, uncertainly. “Really, where?” she asked, genuinely interested.

“The Washington Post,” I said, helplessly.

Mrs. Graham placed a hand over her mouth for a moment. And then she threw back her head and laughed for a full minute.

When she had finally stopped laughing, she leaned forward and said, “How exciting. What an adventure you’re going to have.”

We chatted for the next several minutes about the paper. While I can’t recall all the specifics of what she said, what I do remember is this: she hoped I would have half as much fun at the paper as she did. She was warm, and funny, and self-mocking, and not at all haughty, and very much engaged in what the young women at the paper were doing.

The following Monday, my first day of work, as I sat at my new desk in my swivel chair, Mrs. Graham came down the hall. She just wanted to say hello.

“Welcome to the paper,” she said, smiling broadly, still enjoying the joke. And for the next several years, if she passed by the sports section, she always stopped for a moment to ask how it was going.

That’s my Mrs. Graham story. I wish I had more. Susan O’Malley has her own. At the start of this WNBA season, O’Malley invited Mrs. Graham to a Washington Mystics game to be honored as a female business pioneer. O’Malley was slightly nervous about it because she wondered if the young WNBA audience would fully appreciate who Mrs. Graham was.

In a moment, O’Malley’s question was answered. Mrs. Graham began to walk slowly down the sideline for the half-court ceremony. The entire crowd in the MCI Center rose to its feet and began to roar. “She wasn’t even announced before they were on their feet,” O’Malley says. “When she showed up, it validated the whole building. People were out of hand.” So that’s what Susan O’Malley will remember about Mrs. Graham: a stadium full of young women, on their feet, applauding a life.