

Athlete photographs by Howard Schatz
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“The Gift” by George Vecsey [introduction to the photographs]

Some of them immediately understand the gift they have received. With the arrogance of the young and the talented, they accept it as their natural right. Others ignore the talent in their bodies, like somebody who cannot open a birthday present for days or weeks because it is too close, too personal. They do not readily see that they are different from other people.

One young girl could not comprehend why she could catch a ball so easily with a flick of her hand while the same ball would fall from her classmates' hands with the soft thunk of failure. Were they not trying? Did they not want to catch the ball? The girl was frustrated with her gift until the state scientists came around (this was in the old Czechoslovakia) and measured her muscles and her central nervous system and declared that she was exceptionally gifted and must be put into advanced ice hockey and tennis programs. It was only then that Martina Navratilova accepted, at least intellectually, that she had been given a blessing.

The gift was genetic, to be sure, something that was there from the beginning. When people talk about great athletes, they talk of it in terms of muscle, but more likely it is something in the nerve endings that makes them react a little faster, a little more accurately than the average human being. There is also the soul of an athlete, the obsession of an athlete, that sears outward from his person, from her photograph.

In Navratilova's case, the hard work would come much later, producing a flurry of excellence her sport had never seen before. She blended her gifts with her need to excel, and soon other tennis players were talking to gymnasiums and running up steep stairs and watching their diets. Athletes in many other sports had been doing this for decades, facing the reality of the gift flexing in their young bodies. We see them in gaudy team uniforms with their muscles pumping beneath their taut skin as they dunk basketballs and leap over the high bar and ride a bicycle straight up a mountain and blast a soccer ball into the corner of the net. We see them in warmup suits on the podium accepting their medals, and we see them in interviews trying to articulate why they have just won a championship; but it is much harder to comprehend the wedding of their wills with the original gift of their bodies.

. . . . Their body types determine what sport they will play. Football linemen will not be jockeys, and gymnasts will not be high jumpers. Once the natural selection is made, the differences are accentuated by self-improvement. Aside from the odd baseball player who pours sacks full of American fast food into his body and has the flabby physique to prove it, almost all athletes today are products of the personal trainer and the nutritionist and the pharmacist and the psychologist.

Sprinters are almost a breed unto themselves. Their entire being is tied into power in the butt and thighs and upper body without carrying extra baggage. On a Monday morning, coaches and trainers glance at the sprinter and spot an extra ounce of weight and declare it to be an entire ruinous hundredth of a second attached to his waist. One sprinter depicted in these pages talked of a quarter century of work, six days a week,

at his regular routine – stretching, lifting, running, stretching – just so he could be microseconds faster than his rivals.

To be sure, not all great athletes are easily defined by muscle mass. Neurological reactions are important too. Hockey goalies are the most obvious examples, ranging from gaunt specters with sunken eyes to nearly pudgy specimens with ill-defined musculature. But when the frozen piece of rubber known as a puck is screaming toward them, they can pull it out of the air like a child catching lazy fireflies. They go to clinics to develop their hand-to-eye speed. Very little is left to chance.

From endless repetitions, the cyclist develops thighs the size of Plymouth Rock, the left-hander's pitching arm dangles inches lower than his right arm, football players develop stretch marks on their chests and biceps like the stomach of a woman who has delivered a half dozen children. Power always comes from the gluteus, the butt muscles, whether thick or compact or elongated. Tailors work overtime to fit home-run sluggers into their expensive suits.

. . . . Many athletes have a peak like the life span of a mayfly. It may last a month or a year. Athletes have been known to reach their peak within the four-year span between Olympics, never reaching the victory podium in that quadrennial jamboree. . . . They cannot, they would not, conceal their naked obsession. They make the most of this mystery they have been given, this body, this gift.