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Open water swimmer Sally Bauer – a star but not a heroine

Claes Annerstedt[1] **& Marie Annerstedt**[2]

[1] Department of Food and Nutrition, and Sport Science, University of Gothenburg; [2] GU Ventures, affiliated to the University of Gothenburg

Author contact <claes.annerstedt@ped.gu.se>

Abstract

Purpose
This article examines the accomplishments of Swedish long-distance swimmer Sally Bauer. Its primary aim is to document Bauer's achievements, contextualize them within their historical framework, and analyze, through a theoretical lens on heroism, the reasons her contributions have not garnered the recognition they merit.

Method
The study utilizes a diverse range of source materials, including press coverage from *Idrottsbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, and *Göteborgs-Posten*, Bauer's autobiography, and four radio interviews with Bauer.

Results
Within the male-dominated realm of long-distance swimming during the 1930s and 1940s, Bauer's accomplishments disrupted entrenched stereotypes of women as fragile and passive. She broke barriers and redefined societal perceptions of female athletes and their capabilities. However, despite her extraordinary achievements, Bauer was never fully acknowledged as a national icon or Swedish heroine. Societal biases of the time overshadowed her groundbreaking contributions, denying her the recognition she rightly deserved.

Keywords: open-water swimming, Sally Bauer, heroism, long-distance swimming, women in sports, channel swim, sport stars, media

Introduction

Long-distance swimming, now officially referred to as open water swimming, is a discipline practiced outdoors in seas, lakes, and rivers. The popularity of this sport has fluctuated significantly over time. Notable marathon swims were recorded as early as the late nineteenth century, although the sport appeared to reach its peak during the interwar period (Vertinsky & Job, 2006; Trangbæk, 2005). In recent decades, however, open water swimming has experienced a revival, with competitions now held over distances of 5, 10, and 25 kilometres. Since 2008, the 10-kilometer event has been included in the Olympic programme. One of the very first Swedish women to engage in long-distance swimming was Sally Bauer, who achieved considerable athletic success but never truly received the recognition she deserved.

Surprisingly, long-distance swimming gained significant popularity in Scandinavia, despite an unfavourable climate characterized by cold water and a short swimming season. The sport was particularly well-received in Denmark, which produced many prominent stars, especially among female athletes. In the late 1930s, Denmark's most celebrated sports figures were female swimmers, many of whom excelled in long-distance swimming (Bonde, 2006; Heisz, 2014). The most famous of these was Jenny Kammersgaard, who accomplished several remarkable feats, including swims across the Horsens Fjord (1936), the Kattegat (1937), twice across the English Channel, and from Gedser in Denmark to Warnemünde in Germany (1938). The latter swim, classified as a world record, was estimated at 110 kilometres and took 40.5 hours to complete (Bonde, 2006). By the late 1930s and into the following two decades, female long-distance swimmers had become Denmark's most prominent sports figures. In addition to Kammersgaard, notable athletes included Lilli Andersen, Ragnhild Hveger, Inge Sørensen, Greta Andersen, and Mille Gade. As a result, long-distance swimming in Denmark garnered significant public acclaim, with these female swimmers achieving near-heroic status—an accomplishment that remains unmatched in Sweden.

In Sweden, Sally Bauer remained, for a long time, the only notable female long-distance swimmer, alongside her two sisters. However, in the past two decades, Anna-Carin Nordin has emerged as one of Sweden's most accomplished long-distance swimmers, alongside Bauer. Nordin, for instance, was the first woman to complete the Ocean's Seven challenge, widely regarded as one of the most demanding achievements in long-dis-

tance swimming. This challenge comprises seven iconic swims, including the English Channel, which can be completed in any order. However, the same strict rules apply to all of them: swimmers may only wear a standard swimsuit, swim cap, goggles, and earplugs. Nordin successfully crossed the English Channel in 12 hours and 59 seconds—over two hours faster than Sally Bauer's recorded time (Nordin, 2024).

It is important to note that in the early twentieth century, when Sally Bauer completed her long-distance swims, most sports requiring endurance and strength were almost exclusively reserved for men. At the time, medical science propagated the belief that women's bodies—and even their psyches—could not endure intense physical exertion. Women who defied these medical claims by participating in endurance sports were sometimes ridiculed or portrayed as overly masculine. Long-distance swimming appears, somewhat surprisingly, to have been an exception to the prevailing perception of women in endurance sports. Nevertheless, throughout the history of sport, a small number of pioneering women have defied these norms, taking on formidable athletic challenges, demonstrating exceptional skill, and setting records that equalled or even surpassed those of their male counterparts.

This article highlights the accomplishments of the Swedish long-distance swimmer Sally Bauer, who, from the late 1930s until 1951, accomplished several remarkable and extraordinary swimming achievements at a time when women's sports received little recognition and when female athletes had to contend with prejudice and suspicion. The article aims to highlight Sally Bauer's athletic achievements, place her accomplishments in a historical context, and, from a theoretical perspective on heroism, explore why Bauer and her achievements have not received the recognition they deserve.

Method

To conduct this study, various types of source material were utilized: press coverage from *Idrottsbladet*, the leading sports newspaper in Sweden at the time; articles from Swedish daily newspapers in the three largest cities (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, and *Göteborgs-Posten*); Bauer's autobiography; four radio interviews with Bauer conducted over the years; and a telephone interview with her son. Additionally, relevant secondary sources within the field were consulted to supplement the research. These

diverse methods and materials were combined to examine the representation of Bauer and her achievements.

Using biographies

This article examines the life of an extraordinary sportswoman. Writing about such individuals, particularly when using biographies as source material, presents certain challenges, as biographies often risk glorifying their subjects. For instance, autobiographies may portray individuals in an overly favourable light or contain unreliable memories due to lapses in recollection. To avoid overinterpretation, it is essential to acknowledge that biographies are socially constructed and must be understood within their broader social context (Kristensson Uggla, 2011). This consideration is especially relevant here, as men and women have historically faced unequal opportunities in sports, particularly regarding media coverage and self-representation (Liljeström, 2011). Consequently, Bauer's life story is analyzed in relation to contemporary history and the overarching gender order.

Bauer's autobiography serves primarily as a resource to gain a nuanced understanding of her subjective perspective, alongside her construction and interpretation of events and their personal significance (Caine, 2018). Furthermore, her autobiography, published in 1939, benefits from being written in close temporal proximity to the events it describes, suggesting that her memories of these events were likely still vivid. The autobiography also reflects the cultural norms of what was considered acceptable and legitimate during that era (Niskanen, 2007).

Life story and swimming achievements

Sally Bauer was born in Halmstad in 1908, the youngest of four sisters. She grew up in Helsingborg, in a family deeply involved in swimming, making it natural for her to be introduced to the sport at an early age. At just seven years old, she began training with the Helsingborg Swim Club. During her childhood, she spent a considerable amount of time at the swimming hall, quickly demonstrating both talent and dedication in her training (Hammer, 2002).

Two of Sally's sisters, Carla and Paula, were also long-distance swimmers. However, it was primarily Carla who provided significant support

during many of Sally's long-distance swims. For example, the two sometimes trained together by swimming between Helsingborg, Sweden, and Helsingør, Denmark, and they also participated in competitions held between the two cities. The straight-line distance between Helsingborg and Helsingør is 3.5 kilometres.

It is noteworthy that none of the sources reference an influential swimming coach who played a significant role in shaping Sally Bauer's swimming career. Instead it appears that she primarily trained independently or alongside one of her sisters, who was also a swimmer. Furthermore, Bauer does not mention any substantial influence from her parents. On the contrary, they seem to have been rather unenthusiastic about their daughter's high-profile long-distance swims.

After growing up in Helsingborg, Sally Bauer moved to Stockholm, where she worked for a year as a National Instructor for the Swedish Swimming Federation. In 1938, she relocated to Ängelholm in southern Sweden to take up a position as a swimming teacher. After a few years of working professionally with swimming in Ängelholm, Bauer transitioned to administrative roles as a secretary and office worker for various companies in Malmö, a position she held until her retirement (Interview with Carl-Axel Bauer, 2024). She passed away in Lund in 2001 at the remarkable age of 93.

Here is an account of some of the notable long-distance swims in which Sally Bauer participated. Numerous competitions were held, particularly across the Öresund Strait. The most popular was the annual race between Helsingborg and Helsingør, but several others were organized, including Vedbæk-Landskrona, Dragør-Limhamn, and Skodsborg-Landskrona. Sally Bauer competed in these events, achieving several victories, including winning the Helsingborg-Helsingør race—even against male competitors.

Another prestigious long-distance event was the Älvsborg Swim in Gothenburg, held between 1924 and 1939 at the mouth of the Göta Älv River. Sally Bauer excelled in this competition, winning it four times—in 1928, 1931, 1932, and 1933.

In 1939, she participated in the Baltic Sea Swim from Gedser in Denmark to Warnemünde in Germany, though she was unable to complete it. Late in the evening on Monday, July 24, 1939, at precisely 11:05 PM, Sally Bauer and some other competitors entered the water at Gedser, located on the Danish island of Falster near Denmark's southernmost point. Ahead of them lay a gruelling 45-kilometer swim—the straight-line distance—slightly longer than a marathon.

Throughout the night, Sally crawled through the water, battling what she later described as "angry waves". Cheered on by the men in her support boat, she endured worsening weather conditions, with waves reaching heights of one meter. Despite taking the lead, the brutal conditions began to take their toll. One by one, her competitors dropped out, many succumbing to seasickness. By 2:22 PM, after over 15 hours of relentless swimming and with only about 10 kilometres remaining, Sally was forced to abandon the race and was pulled aboard the support boat. Ultimately, all participants were compelled to withdraw, defeated by the unforgiving conditions of the sea (Wiberg, 2019).

Some of Sally Bauer's most notable achievements include crossing the Øresund (1931; 18 kilometres in 6 hours and 22 minutes), the Kattegat (1938; 48 kilometres in 17 hours and 5 minutes), and the Sea of Åland (1938; 30 kilometres in 13 hours and 6 minutes). On August 27, 1939, just five days before the outbreak of World War II, she became the second Scandinavian to swim across the English Channel. Battling strong tidal currents, she completed the 34-kilometer swim in 15 hours and 22 minutes. She repeated this feat in 1951, improving her time to 14 hours and 40 minutes. Below are some brief accounts of her three most famous long-distance swims: across the Kattegat, the Åland Sea, and the English Channel.

At half-past four in the morning on July 24, 1938, Sally Bauer, coated in grease, entered the water at Gniben, the outermost point of Zealand in Denmark. The sea was rough, and the water was relatively cold (15-16°C). After 13 hours and with only 8-9 kilometres left to reach Jutland, she was forced to stop, frozen to the bone. She had to give up, and Bauer writes the following about the incident in her autobiography: "It felt endlessly bitter to have to give up. There I was, struggling for 16 and a half hours, and it was all for nothing. I was not physically exhausted and could have easily kept swimming until I reached the goal. No, it was the cold that defeated me." (Bauer, 1939, p. 10).

However, on August 4, 1938, at 5 a.m., she attempted the Kattegat again, once more facing rough seas and cold water. This time, the swim was sponsored by two newspapers, which covered the costs of renting the boat and the necessary onboard personnel, including crew members (4 people), a doctor, a lifeguard, an official observer, and media representatives. After a courageous swim, she reached Jutland in 17 hours and 5 minutes, beating Danish Jenny Kammersgaard's previous record by over 12 hours. Bauer attributed her faster time to swimming freestyle, while Kammersgaard had used breaststroke. The distance Sally Bauer had swum was estimated to be

57 kilometres, despite the straight-line distance being stated as 45 kilometres. Bauer writes the following about the Kattegat swim:

> I lay there, working at full capacity against the current and, of course, couldn't avoid occasionally getting a wave in my mouth. It wasn't particularly pleasant to have salt water on top of the warm sugar water I was being fed from time to time during the journey. My stomach also rebelled, and I threw up the entire contents a couple of minutes later. (Bauer, 1939, pp. 16-17).

Just a few days later, on August 12, 1938, Bauer again coated herself in grease and entered the water at 4:30 a.m., this time at Grisslehamn, north of Stockholm, aiming to swim the 30 kilometres to Åland in Finland. After 13 hours and 6 minutes she completed this widely publicized swim. This swim was sponsored by *Dagens Nyheter*, a newspaper based in Stockholm. The weather was beautiful, the water was relatively warm (16 to 19 degrees Celsius), and the swim was completed without any major issues (*Dagens Nyheter*, August 13, 1938). It was, moreover, the first time Bauer swam in what she referred to as "freshwater," which she did not enjoy. She writes in her autobiography about the Åland swim:

> For me, it's practically pure freshwater, as I'm used to much saltier conditions. It also feels significantly heavier to swim in this water; I have to put in a bit of extra effort with each stroke… I think it tastes like soap water when it gets into my mouth. Now I realize that it also affects me in another way—the protective fat layer, which is supposed to shield me from the worst of the cold in the water, is literally peeling off. After just half an hour, I had to apply new layers of fat to my arms and legs. (Bauer, 1939, p. 34).

Back in Stockholm after her successful swim, she was celebrated at the Stockholm Olympic Stadium and interviewed on the radio by legendary reporter Sven Jerring.

However, swimming across the English Channel is the real test in long-distance swimming. That is why Sally Bauer had set her sights on completing a channel swim. A channel swim is associated with careful preparation and large costs, which means that the swimmer needs sponsors and people who have previous experience of channel swimming and can help in the implementation. The newspapers *Idrottsbladet*, *Arbetet* and *Göteborgs-Posten* as well as the amusement park Gröna Lund in Stockholm, the compa-

nies Banankompaniet and the film and theatre company Sandrews stepped in as sponsors and paid for Sally Bauer's first channel swim.

Once in England, Sally Bauer received invaluable assistance from Ted Temme, the head of the swimming pool in Nottingham and a seasoned swimmer who had successfully crossed the English Channel twice (*Göteborgs-Posten*, August 28, 1939). He shared his expertise, offering insights from his own experiences, and provided practical support, including helping her select and test suitable swimming goggles. Although the straight-line distance from Dover to Calais is just around 34 kilometres, the actual distance a swimmer must cover is significantly greater due to the challenging currents. Ted Temme estimated the distance at best to be 50 kilometres, but with unfavourable weather and wind conditions, it could double (*Idrottsbladet*, August 28, 1939).

On August 27, 1939, at 5:50 a.m., Sally Bauer waded into the water at Cap Gris Nez near Calais, France. After eight hours of swimming, she had only nine kilometres left of the required 33.8 to reach Dover on the English side. However, the current turned, and for three and a half hours, she fought to keep from being swept back from the coast. At 9:12 p.m., Sally Bauer landed 9 kilometres southwest of Dover, completing the swim in 15 hours and 22 minutes. The next day, the channel was closed to all swimming and small boat traffic, and a few days later, on September 1, World War II broke out. In her autobiography, Bauer writes the following about her experiences of channel swimming:

> The water in the Channel is very salty and you floated extremely easily, too easily, because when crawling the leg kick comes up too high. The mucous membranes of the nose and mouth became completely salted. The tongue became swollen, white with deep furrows, and seemed to take up all the space in the mouth. A little warm cocomalt or some peppermint caramels helped for a while, but it was not possible to permanently slow down the swimming with such things. Otherwise, I felt excellent and also benefited from lovely weather. (Bauer, 1939, p. 63).

Bauer received widespread acclaim following her accomplishment. In England, she was celebrated with a BBC interview, and upon her return to Malmö, she was greeted with great enthusiasm. The Malmö newspaper *Arbetet*, led by journalist Lennart Strandberg, organized a motorcade through the city that evening, reportedly drawing thousands of spectators. The celebrations continued late into the night at Malmö's Folkets Park, a public city park, where large crowds gathered to honour her remarkable achievement.

Sally Bauer's second swim across the English Channel was a competitive event organized by the *Daily Mail*, which invited around twenty former Channel swimmers to participate. The race began again near Calais on the French side and ended near Dover on the English side. The newspaper covered all participants' expenses, except for travel to and from the venue, and provided each swimmer with an allowance of £250 (*Idrottsbladet*, August 27, 1951).

At the time of her second Channel swim in 1951, Sally Bauer was 43 years old, retired from long-distance swimming, and, by her own admission, relatively untrained. Despite these challenges, she completed the swim in 14 hours and 40 minutes, finishing 14th out of the 16 swimmers who successfully completed the race. Remarkably, she wore the same swimming goggles during this swim that she had used eleven years earlier. As to why she swam the Channel a second time, she commented: "Someone was stupid enough to doubt me, and then I thought they don't know who Sally Bauer is!" (Interview with Sally Bauer, 2000).

Why did Sally Bauer take up long-distance swimming?

Historically, long-distance swimming was not widely recognized as a legitimate or fully sportified activity. However, its popularity has grown significantly in recent decades. Today, long-distance swimming is both a competitive discipline and a recreational pursuit enjoyed by enthusiasts on every continent.

In the first half of the 20th century, many sports, including long-distance swimming, were primarily practiced by men and were closely associated with ideals of masculinity. Media representations of sportswomen during this period often ridiculed them or portrayed them as "beauty queens" rather than serious athletes, thereby reinforcing gendered perceptions of sport (Tolvhed, 2012; Hedenborg & Pfister, 2015). Research further highlights how female athletes were frequently sexualized or infantilized, reflecting broader societal expectations and values. However, despite the pervasive influence of gender on societal expectations, values and self-perceptions, certain individuals managed to transcend normative boundaries, thereby challenging and potentially reshaping these conventions. Sally Bauer was one of these early female athletes who challenged the image of the sporting woman as fragile, submissive, and demure.

In the predominantly male-dominated sphere of long-distance swimming during the early 1930s, Bauer's achievements indisputably challenged the prevailing stereotypes of women's perceived fragility and passivity. However, she did not actively position herself as an advocate for women's rights. Instead, her endeavors were motivated by a desire to enjoy herself, gain new experiences, and embrace personal challenges. Bauer characterized herself as highly determined, goal-oriented, and motivated by a desire to test her own limits (Interview with Sally Bauer, 1983). As a woman in this male-dominated field, she encountered scepticism and patronizing attitudes, which only fuelled her resolve to prove her worth as a long-distance swimmer. Despite some scepticism surrounding women's participation in endurance sports, our analysis has not revealed any derogatory comments regarding Bauer's involvement in long-distance swimming. On the contrary, Bauer strategically utilized the opportunities her femininity afforded her, gaining significant attention and favourable public relations, while simultaneously rejecting the limitations imposed by her gender.

Long-distance swimming can be classified as an *adventure sport*, a concept explored by Arnegård (2006). According to him, the emphasis in adventure sports is not primarily on external achievements but on the participants' inner experiences. Many swimmers describe "feeling" the activity deeply in their bodies, portraying these sensations as profoundly powerful and transformative. Participants also report a heightened awareness of their physical performance, characterized by an intrinsic sense of movement or bodily consciousness that enriches their experience. Arnegård further notes that adventure sports participants find it highly rewarding to navigate challenges through their choices and actions, guided by immediate feedback from their environment. This dynamic creates an experience often described as "addictive", motivating individuals to return repeatedly in search of meaning, fulfilment, and the unique satisfaction it provides (p. 250).

Sally Bauer's fascination with long-distance swimming closely aligns with the perspectives outlined by Arnegård. Her motivation did not arise from a desire to confront risk or danger but rather from the immersive and transformative experience of unity with the water. In a 1938 interview with radio reporter Sven Jerring, Bauer was asked if she enjoyed spending so much time in the water. She replied, "It's pleasant, and I enjoy it. It's absolutely no torment." She further expressed her love for the activity, saying, "I love swimming. I enjoy it when I swim."

Similarly, Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to successfully swim the English Channel, articulated a comparable sense of connection with the water. Reflecting on her experiences, Ederle emphasized the pure joy of swimming and the profound feeling of unity with the aquatic environment, stating, "At first, I swam because I had an aptitude for it. Later, it soothed my soul" (Vertinsky & Job, 2006, p. 252). It should be added that Sally Bauer expressed in interviews that Ederle's swim across the English Channel had inspired her herself to take on that challenge at some point in the future.

Bauer also shared insights into her thoughts while swimming: "Sometimes, I would hum melodies in my head while swimming. Other times, I would count strokes. For some reason, I always counted to 700. Why, I don't know..." (Hammer, 2002). However, she emphasized that the most critical aspect of her swims was maintaining a steady rhythm in her crawl stroke. Reflecting on her swim across the Kattegat, Bauer wrote about her experience:

> To pass the time, I lay there counting jellyfish. They were countless, and since they were of the reddish-brown kind, stinging jellyfish, I had to keep a watchful eye on them. They don't sting terribly, but it's best to avoid them. I also hummed a tune inwardly at times, but mostly, I just enjoyed the opportunity to swim (Bauer, 1939, p. 17).

Bauer found that the varying characteristics of different waters posed a greater challenge than the cold. During her Channel swims, the high salinity was so intense that it caused the skin in her throat to peel. Additionally, she swallowed significant amounts of seawater, leading her to vomit multiple times during the swim. In contrast, the Åland Sea's waters were far less salty than those of the English Channel and of the Öresund, where she regularly trained. However, she expressed a strong aversion to swimming in freshwater, and declared that "*it is heavy, dark and dirty*" (Interview with Sally Bauer, 1938).

When analyzing Bauer's reflections on swimming, the experiences she described, and the reasons to why she swam long-distances, one is immediately reminded of what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) refers to as "flow". Flow is characterized as a state of consciousness in which an individual becomes fully immersed in an activity, transcending reflective self-awareness while experiencing a profound sense of control. This state is inherently positive, often associated with feelings of pleasure, and defined by complete absorption in the task at hand. Sally Bauer deeply enjoyed swimming, felt

at one with the water, and experienced a sensation of floating both physically and metaphorically. She herself pointed out that she had a body type well-suited for swimming freestyle. She was 173 cm tall and weighed 58 kg when she completed her swims across the Kattegat and the Åland Sea. She believed this was ideal, allowing her to stay well-positioned in the water and achieve excellent propulsion in her strokes (Interview with Sally Bauer, 1983). These motives for why she swam stand in sharp contrast to how Sally Bauer was portrayed in a recent Swedish film adaptation of her life, *Den svenska torpeden* (*The Swedish Torpedo*) (2024), which suggests that financial gain was her primary motivation for undertaking long-distance swims. This interpretation is simply inaccurate. In reality, her main motivation stemmed from her love of swimming and her desire to enjoy and connect deeply with the water.

Sports heroes

In recent years, a significant body of research has explored the concept of the sports hero, underscoring its status as a social construct that mirrors the ideals and values of the societies in which it emerges (Hellström, 2004; Hellström, 2014; Parry, 2020). Goksøyr (2008) defines the sports hero as an individual capable of "bearing some extra burdens, with selfless behaviour. A historical hero is often someone who has led the way and made sacrifices" (p. 181). Both Hellström (2014) and Goksøyr (2008) argue that heroism is an absolute quality, contending that an individual cannot embody heroic attributes in one domain while simultaneously displaying morally or ethically deficient traits in another.

Hellström (2014) further conceptualizes the sports hero as a construct consisting of three interdependent components: achievement, individual, and audience. The valuation of specific achievements is influenced by several factors. First, the inherent characteristics and societal significance of the sport itself contribute to its perceived merit. Second, the particular sport under consideration affects the value ascribed to the achievement. Third, the manner in which the accomplishment is realized holds substantial weight. Lastly, the media's role in disseminating and amplifying the achievement is a critical factor.

In addition to exceptional athletic performances, the sports hero's personality is a pivotal element. The individual must embody personal qualities and exemplify ideals and values that align with societal norms of hero-

ism. The construction of heroism is ultimately a culturally contextualized process shaped by the audience, which determines who qualifies for this esteemed status. Consequently, the same individual may be celebrated as a hero by one audience, such as their national community, while receiving diminished recognition in other contexts. In this sense, sports heroes serve as reflections of societal norms and dominant cultural values.

Dahlén (2008) and Parry (2020) emphasize the indispensable role of media in the construction of sports heroes, asserting that the existence of sports heroes is inconceivable without media representation. While athletes may achieve remarkable success in their respective fields, it is through media platforms that they are elevated to the status of cultural icons.

In addition, media portrayals of sports heroes frequently align with prevailing cultural ideals and values. This alignment has prompted sociologists and media scholars to investigate how media representations shape these figures and perpetuate existing power structures. For instance, studies on Swedish sports heroes (Hellström, 2014, 2017; Tolvhed, 2008) highlight the emergence of a stable archetype during the post-war period. This archetype, though subject to some variations, portrayed the Swedish sports hero as an ordinary, honourable male (rather than a woman), typically from a rural background, who achieved international success by bringing "gold and glory" to Sweden before returning to the idyllic simplicity of his native country. This idealized depiction underscores the intertwined relationship between cultural context, societal values, and media narratives in the construction of sports heroism.

Sally Bauer achieved remarkable individual accomplishments during an era when women's sports were still in their infancy and prevailing scientific opinions largely deemed endurance sports unsuitable for women (Annerstedt, 1984). The fact that she was a woman made it, by definition at the time, difficult to gain real acceptance for her athletic accomplishments. While it might have been accepted for women to engage in sports, doing something as risky and physically demanding as long-distance swimming was highly questionable. Her accomplishments were indeed remarkable, yet she faced significant challenges as a woman participating in a sport that was neither a national sport nor one that attracted substantial media attention. The level of attention Sally Bauer garnered in Sweden is hardly comparable to the recognition afforded to the long-distance swimmers

in Denmark. In the Danish context, these athletes were, in effect, celebrated as national heroes (Heisz, 2014).

Although Bauer set seventeen[1] Swedish swimming records, she never secured a World Cup title or an Olympic medal. Despite her position among the Swedish swimming elite, she was not selected for the national team that represented Sweden at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. This exclusion was a source of deep frustration for her, prompting the remark: "It was more important for the leaders to bring their wives than to have a strong team!" (Interview with Sally Bauer, 1951). Furthermore, following her first successful Channel swim, Bauer was nominated for the *Svenska Dagbladet* prestigious Medal of Achievement; however, she never received the award. The Medal in 1939 was instead awarded to Sven Selånger, for being the first foreigner to win the ski jumping competition in Holmenkollen, Norway. It was not until 1960 that the medal was presented to a woman—swimmer Jane Cederqvist—who was recognized for winning a silver medal at the Rome Olympics that same year.

It can further be noted that the media landscape of this period was overwhelmingly male dominated. Sports journalism, in particular, was exclusively authored by men, with its discourse shaped by male perspectives and male-oriented jargon. The language frequently employed metaphors rooted in traditionally male-dominated domains. Consequently, sports media was produced by men, primarily about men, and targeted predominantly male audiences through intentionally crafted linguistic frameworks (Hargreaves, 2000; Tolvhed, 2015). Women were portrayed as fragile and perceived as unsuitable for endurance sports. For example, Torsten Tegnér, editor of *Idrottsbladet*, the dominant sports newspaper in Sweden at this time, was highly sceptical of women competing in anything other than sports that emphasized feminine charm, beauty, and sexuality. When Tegnér did write positively about women's sports, it was typically in a way that focused on their appearance and always framed their achievements in comparison to men's sports (*Idrottsbladet*, August 1939).

Under these conditions, female athletes, including Sally Bauer, received significantly less media attention than their male counterparts—a disparity that continues to this day. Men's sports were gener-

1 There is also information that Sally Bauer set 23 Swedish swimming records, but this information has not been verified.

ally regarded as more prestigious, especially in disciplines perceived as unsuitable for women, such as those requiring physical strength and endurance (Annerstedt, 1984; Abalo & Danielsson, 2004). This bias often served to diminish women's accomplishments, marginalizing and trivializing female athletes (Tolvhed, 2015).

Notably, despite these systemic biases, there is no evidence to suggest that Sally Bauer's engagement in an extreme endurance sport like long-distance swimming faced extensive criticism. The media attention was positive but lacked notable enthusiasm. This is particularly striking given that, only a few years earlier, medical experts had adamantly claimed that women were neither physically nor physiologically suited for "strenuous endurance sports" (Annerstedt, 1984; Olofsson, 1989). Instead, contemporary sports journalists appeared to view Bauer's extraordinary accomplishments with genuine astonishment, highlighting their unprecedented nature and challenging preconceived notions about women's capabilities in endurance sports. The journalists reported on and briefly acknowledged Bauer's completed swims, but did so without employing superlatives or expressing admiration.

Sally Bauer undoubtedly challenged existing conceptions of which sports were deemed appropriate and acceptable for women to participate in. She was portrayed in the media as a swimmer that trained hard, had natural talent embodying what could be described as "primal force", and her crawl technique was described as both beautiful and efficient (*Idrottsbladet*, August, 1939). In Sweden's renowned sports reference book, *Nordisk Familjeboks Sportlexikon*, Sally Bauer was described as someone who "trains with an intensity unusual for a Swedish swimmer, and through these swims, she has proven herself to belong to the world's long-distance elite" (Svahn, 1938, p. 687).

In the official certificate from the organizers of the channel swim, they draw attention to Sally Bauer's excellent swimming technique and describe it as follows:

> Her style of crawling was the most wonderful example of what can be accomplished with this perfect mode of swimming. Not once during these 15 hours and 22 minutes did Miss Bauer vary her style. The movements of the legs were remarkably regular, and a constant arm stroke of 54 strokes per minute was noted, increasing up to 56 just before the finish. (*Idrottsbladet*, August 30, 1939).

Bauer reflected indeed ideals such as perseverance, endurance, strength, and courage, ideas that were not seen as feminine. Furthermore, she was simple, fearless, determined and honest, but she was not modest. After completing her swim across the Åland Sea, Sally Bauer was interviewed by Sven Jerring, a renowned Swedish radio journalist. During the interview, her fearless and confident demeanour shone through as she responded to questions with humour and irony. The exchange unfolded as follows, and in which Sally gives answers to what she thinks are strange questions:

> Sv*en Jerring:* How do your knees feel, Miss Bauer, after spending thirteen hours in the water?
> *Sally Bauer:* I don't feel anything at all because I don't use my knees when I swim.

> *Sven Jerring:* I imagine there are polite gentlemen in the support boat. Are they doing everything they can to encourage you?
> *Sally Bauer:* Yes, but it's quite futile because you can't hear anything when you're in the water. However, when I see their satisfied expressions, I feel very grateful and happy (Interview with Sally Bauer, 1938).

In addition, she often emphasized her achievements and perhaps slightly exaggerated the attention her feats received. In her biography and interviews, she claimed that tens of thousands of people—40.000 is specifically mentioned in her autobiography—celebrated her at Folkets Park in Malmö after she completed her Channel swim. While this figure was likely somewhat inflated, and no official records confirm it, it is undeniable that she was celebrated wherever she went following her widely recognized long-distance swims.

A hero should rise above political discussions and other charged issues that could easily make them controversial. Although politically aware, Bauer was not particularly socially and politically engaged. Her autobiography mentions receiving personal congratulations from Adolf Hitler himself after her Kattegat swim—an acknowledgment that likely did little to endear her to the Swedish public. However, she never publicly took a stance on Nazism or other political issues, which may have affected her image.

Undoubtedly, Bauer made significant contributions to changing the perception of women's sports, proving that almost anything is possible with determination. She broke barriers and reshaped perceptions of female athletes and their capabilities. However, her chosen discipline—long-distance open-water swimming—was not considered suitable or appealing for women at the time, which limited her recognition. Additionally, her

confident demeanour and bold expressions sometimes led others to perceive her as a know-it-all, further hindering her public reception.

Despite her remarkable accomplishments in long-distance swimming, Sally Bauer was never fully embraced as a national symbol or Swedish heroine. Her achievements occurred at a time when the media focused primarily on athletic performance rather than personalizing athletes, limiting public engagement with her character. This lack of attention to her personality, combined with the outbreak of World War II shortly after her successes, diverted public focus and diminished her lasting impact.

Sally Bauer's long-distance swims required exceptional physical strength and buoyancy, and although she never considered herself a pioneer or a trailblazer for women's sports, she undoubtedly served as a role model for female athletes in the mid-20th century. She achieved remarkable feats through her swimming and challenged the prevailing physiological assumptions of her time, which scarcely believed that such long-distance swims in relatively cold water were even possible for a woman.

Although a star in her time, Bauer ultimately fell short of becoming a true sports hero. Her achievements, while groundbreaking, were overshadowed by societal biases and the unconventional nature of her sport, preventing her from achieving the level of recognition she deserved. However, she can undoubtedly be described as Sweden's queen of long-distance swimming.

Conclusion

Sally Bauer stands out as one of the pioneering female athletes who actively challenged traditional perceptions of women in sports, often characterized by notions of fragility, submissiveness, and demureness. An analysis of her reflections on swimming, the experiences she recounted, and her motivations for engaging in long-distance swimming aligns with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of "flow." Bauer derived profound enjoyment from swimming, experienced a deep sense of unity with the water, and described a sensation of floating that was both physical and metaphorical.

Despite her remarkable achievements, Bauer encountered significant challenges as a woman in a sport that was neither a national pastime nor one that attracted substantial media attention. Additionally, the media landscape of the period was overwhelmingly male dominated, further limiting her visibility. While her accomplishments in long-distance swimming

were groundbreaking, Bauer was never fully embraced as a national icon or celebrated as a Swedish heroine. Her achievements were overshadowed by societal biases and the unconventional nature of her sport, ultimately preventing her from receiving the recognition she rightfully deserved.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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