



MEDAL TABLE

The Federation of Writers (Scotland)

Medal Table

A collection of writing by members of the
Federation of Writers (Scotland) for the 2024
Cultural Olympiad

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The Federation of Writers (Scotland)

Our broad aim is to

promote the arts, heritage and culture with a distinctly Scottish flavour!

Our specific aim is to provide

opportunities for writers at all stages of their careers and development to associate, learn and develop together, through performance, development activities, events, publications and the general celebration of Scottish writing across genres and all three of Scotland's languages, English, Gaelic and Scots.

Welcome - Fàilte – Walcome

The Cultural Olympiad

‘Sport and culture are sometimes pitted against each other, but I think they have a lot in common: performance, emotions, the quest for beauty of movement...’

Tony Estanguet, Canoeist and President of Paris 2024

The idea of melding sport and culture goes back to the ancient Olympic games, where athletes, poets, musicians and sculptors would compete to find the best of the best. When the modern Olympics were established, the Cultural Olympiad was revived, initially with medals, but quickly becoming more celebratory and less competitive. With that in mind, I put out a call for flash fiction and short creative non-fiction inspired by the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympics.

The fifteen stories that arrived were as varied as sport – some imagined Olympic glory (or at least having a try), others considered the history of participation or remembered sport from the perspective of a child. This being Scotland, Andy Murray’s retirement featured in two of the pieces (anyone who watched the Olympic matches couldn’t help but be inspired). What shone through the work was the tenacity and dedication that links writers and sports people. I hope you enjoy reading this collection.

Colette Coen, FWS Scriever 2024

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As I Prepare

Dorcas Wilson

As I prepare to run my first Olympic 100 metres, my great-great grandmother is by my side.

'You go, girl. You go, Bess, girl,' she whispers, her voice dripping with pride at seeing me fulfil my dream.

It was her dream, too.

'It takes more than speed to win,' she says, positioning my body to ensure I will get the best possible start.

She could run like the wind, but she couldn't run free.

'Focus on the finish line. Run your own race. Don't worry about the others.'

She had no choice but to worry about others as they gave her reason after reason why a woman couldn't run on the international stage:

'It would be embarrassing for their menfolk.'

'Too distracting for the male athletes.'

'Running is unladylike.'

'Run in the Olympics? You're lucky we let you run at all.'

'We've got this,' she urges, as we cross the 50-metre mark level with the favourite.

I run with her.

I run for her.

I run free.

Beyond the Couch

Janet Crawford

January '25: update:

My watch lit up, the stepuptaeyerplate app update now light was flashing ... aye aye.

I get it ticked off.

'It's mair revolution than resolution'.

That's the apps' cheesy strapline, but I didnae care.

I'd say watching his last match EVER ... that was the moment. I ken I cannae stand long, my back hurts and it's no easy cheering yer heroes oan when yer afraid to react... *nae fast movements fir awhile*, the doctor hud said, nae excitement. Back then excitement was managing tae make ma ain dinner. I smile, tightening my laces. It was a slow walk at first, counting lampposts, breaths spluttering till they came without thinking through each yin. Eventually, I ran. Then I felt like him, well mibbe kinda like him, cos I'm no him. I'm no daft, I ken that. I mean I'll never be an Olympian, but HE got me started, as I stepped beyond the couch for the first time in a year channelling my inner Andy ... I knew. I thought tae masel if *his hip can dae it then so can my back* and I set oot efter my ain kinda gold. Me, oan a treasure hunt to build back up a life ... beyond the accident. Beyond the couch.

I'll no slip on a tennis baw again, that's fir sure.

Boxing and Wrestling

Mary Irvine

Watching the Olympic boxing and wrestling, a niggling memory entered my head. It grew until the name Arrichion, one of the greatest champions of the Pankration of the Ancient Olympiads eventually surfaced. The Pankration had two rules, no gouging and no grabbing the genitals (although you could kick them). A win was achieved by holding your opponent in a strangle-hold and punching him unconscious. The other way was submission. If you'd had several fingers broken, a shoulder dislocated and multiple groin kicks you might have considered raising an index finger – presumably one not broken – indicating submission. A simple, extremely popular sport not for the faint-hearted. A sport for the biggest and strongest. Occasionally a contestant would die. Arrichion died, defending his Olympic title in 564 BC, yet was proclaimed victor. He actually died after his opponent had submitted so was awarded the Olive Wreath.

Apart from Arrichion another famous champion was Polydamas, the Olympic champion in 408 BC, who is reported to have been incredibly strong. When I needed a Pankration for my book about Theseus, I decided to pair these two, even although they could never have met. It seemed appropriate as the Pankration was, traditionally, conceived by Theseus.

There is a 'modern' Pankration, not in the Modern Olympics, but it is far more restrictive, with a lot of rules and protective clothing being worn. The ancient exponents of Pankration would no doubt regard the modern form with disdain.

Conquering Corrievreckan

Ann MacKinnon

It was his first day back on Jura and that awful exuberance of water below him scoured his thoughts. He knew the Corrievreckan well enough to be afraid. He wanted to conquer this gushing wash just once. According to legend, when you made it, you saw the witch's white plaid.

His first attempt at swimming had been in the North Sea when he was eight. He had felt the tug of the water pulling him under as he swallowed sharp sea salt, but he moved his frozen limbs and managed to paddle ashore, arms in tandem with his legs.

From then on, he sought challenges. Now, at twenty, he was determined to fight the Corrie. There was a small window of time when it was possible.

His wetsuit protected him like a second skin as if anticipating what he was about to do. He wet his goggles and put them on. Ready, he launched himself into the torrent of water where the tides meet and forced his way through to the other side. It was not a long swim, but the sea wanted him, so he had to fight every inch of it, just as he had when he was eight.

He glimpsed the cailleach's plaid, washed pure – virgin white.

He pulled himself back into the boat and through chattering teeth, smiled.

GOAT

Victoria Maciver

Different location, same routine...

She breathes the simple words in slowly, then carefully releases them into the world. Grounding her body like roots to soil then shrinking the world down. Her mind balancing precariously between then and now, falling and rising, the bitter taste of sorrow or that of sweet joy.

The wicked recesses of her mind poke and prod at her with murmured 'you failed'. Time in all its ageless beauty has bestowed upon her the gift of reflection, taught lessons in survival, determination and motivation. Is it truly failure to fall when you love to fly? A stumble the finish line or the opportunity to rise. These were the toughest of lessons, hard won like fingernails cracking as they cling to the cliff edge.

She sat upon a throne built of her own success and the world's gluttonous delight of it. An endless hunger to love the winner, because everyone loves the winner until they're not. It matters not that this is life and death; she's a winner. So, *win!*

But in the silent classroom she rebuilt her mind, re-evaluated her world. Strengthened her mind and body. The mantra remained. *Different location, same routine.*

BEEP!

She sets her face to smiling, rehearsed to sell just as any experienced trader at the market. Ready to rise as the phoenix from the ashes.

Inspired by Simone Biles' return to gymnastics

Goodbye Andy

Laurie Donaldson

You put us through it, you put yourself through it, but by god it was fun. Pushed your body through the Olympics for one last time – only the doubles manageable – to leave on a high. You and another redoubtable, Dan Evans, should have lost against the Japanese and somehow won. You did it again against the Belgians, so many match points saved across both matches, before they young whippersnappers from the US put us into our misery and tears. You didn't want to go but had earned the love through dedication. Although not being smooth and English-media-friendly, you had won the idolatry entitled to a twice Wimbledon winner and all could see that your sleeve was where your heart was.

You exemplified the Scottish cussed spirit, pushed yourself to extremes, and I lived this all with you, following your every match, listening in bed to the late-night commentary from Flushing Meadow, checking ATP timings and draws, willing you forward. I watched as your body strengthened; early games, always fearful of your next injury. Raised on the geometry and modernity of those exotic honed beasts, Borg, Connors and McEnroe, laundry-clean white on background green, I never imagined somebody from my own land could intrude, and that it would be a crabby monomaniac that would become my hero.

Ground Stick, Ground Stick, Ground Stick, Bully

Marka Rifat

How long before hockey proved good for us? Would character form, spine stiffen, teamwork make us fit for the world ahead?

Then, it was all burning cold on mottled legs, jarring pain of frozen pitches, grass hard as shards, mud concrete, the sickening fear of the mysterious *corner* and *offside*, of losing my peripheral vision and all feeling in my hands. And how to block the onslaught of thundering attackers, the ones with better parents, shin pads and dead eyes, my fellow back and goalie fading away, as I mused the eternal choice – English or Indian – while knowing both heads laughably small for the job, then zoned back to see the pitted, bone-white ball shoot across the rutted field of battle churned by studs, zeal, hormones and erratic hand-eye coordination, and reach the ragged net.

Not knowing the rules, always asking, never remembering, hoping for injury/snow/hail/gales – all welcomed – to end the torture.

Heart beat, heart beat, heart beat, bully.

And it was never good for me. My sport is on the sidelines, watching, noting, cheering vaguely, making up the rules for this team of one.

High Jump Accolades

Ellie Ness

Resilient, remarkable, resting on two crutches, Lukasz Mamczarz approaches a taped line to the side of the jump. He casts off one crutch and raises his arms like a warm-up man at a rock concert, whilst the crowd whoops and claps.

Casting aside his remaining crutch, ever the showman, he wobbles on his solitary leg and takes a hopping path towards the high jump.

Will he, won't he? The crowd falls silent.

Soaring backwards – raising his body over the bar – he lands with a small bounce before turning in a lopsided kneeling position. Spectators cast aside their usual partisan leanings and marvel at this tenacious athlete. We're all wrapped up in one human flag at this moment.

Higher

David C. Brydges

I always wanted to be a bird. In my teens, it was my nickname. Thus, I figured the only way to fly through space without drugs, physically, was to become a pole vaulter. It was a gruelling choice as our high school couldn't afford the new fibreglass poles or proper foam mats to cushion the re-entry. Instead, I modestly soared with an aluminum pole and crashed to earth on a slim pile of sawdust. I paid a painful price for these ephemeral flights, however, that thrill of self-propelling my body upwards... Living up to my name was very gratifying.

So, with heightened interest, I watched Swedish pole vaulter Armand Duplantis win Olympic gold and set a new world record on his third and final try in front of the 70,000 ecstatic audience.

His father vaulted, and he even built a training pit for him in his backyard.

The aspect of the form I especially eyed was how the pole bent, sending Armand into the stratosphere where no human had ever been. I fantasised about how it would feel to be riding such a flexible pole higher. Upward to hang out with the birds.

Miracles

Donald Adamson

Gymnastics? Aargh ... I remember the pain and humiliation of falling from the buck at school. Tonight, though, it's the Olympic women's gymnastics, and my eye is caught – why, I wonder? The instinctive male gaze? No, for these are utterly exceptional creatures. They look young, not 'girls' – the term would be disrespectful – but women? Yes, in a special way of being women.

They seem predominantly Asian... delicately featured, fragile embodiments of vitality ... you think a breath of wind would blow them over. But then – the

performance, the strength, the perfection of them! How can any human achieve the balance, the shifts of the body faster than the eye can follow? They are surely beings of the upper air, which is their natural element.

I have seen my 10-year-old granddaughter doing somersaults and handstands in the garden. She belongs to a gymnastics club, wants to progress. Good. But the Olympics? I wouldn't wish that for her. But it is not mine to wish.

The competitors follow each other; the vaults, the bars, the leaps, the miracles. It cannot be a lifelong gift. With the passing years muscles will slacken, flesh will have its way. They will become more human, and – I dare say – lovelier.

Contemplating the so-called blemishes of ageing, I hope they will find, in themselves, their own unique, miraculous beauty.

Passing

Jenifer Harley

While being interviewed by Preston Lodge High School pupils, who were a credit to their teachers, one question was: 'Is there anything you would like to do before you pass?'

'Pass what?' says I, thinking of some kind of test. Some giggles, knowing nod, a wee blush, 'you know **pass on.**'

After some thought, there was no burning ambition or eureka moment. I sign petitions hoping to erase poverty and stop folk fighting each other for that's all I can do. So reflecting on my life: I've visited wonderful places, met amazing people, watched sport on grand stages; enjoyed plays and concerts, eaten in fabulous restaurants, written a book, have great friends; made a lovely family with Dave and have the joy of watching my grandchildren grow – so, of course, I'd like to be there as they become adults.

BUT then I remembered! 'A Pole Vault.' Now it was their turn to say, 'a WHAT?' At every athletics event, my favourite moment is witnessing athletes doing the almost impossible. Launching themselves over a bar more than three times their height.

Oh yes, I'd love to bound along the runway, force myself up on a bendy pole then let go ... wheeee! So if you know anyone in athletics who has contact with a crane driver ... do please let me know.

To Cap It All

Finola Scott

Jane curses. It's late and it's raining. Her hair is soaked, limp as bladder-wrack. And tomorrow it'll be drenched again. She's forgotten about the swimming at school, this block just sneaked up. Too late to buy a cap. Maybe she can pretend to be sick. No, the teacher wouldn't swallow that. She never does, just goes on about fitness, of aiming high. Jane has to admit though, she enjoys swimming, wild swimming that is, in the sea near her granpa's cottage. Especially if sleek seals are frolicking alongside. Laughing, she think of those tales of selkies. How powerful that transformation would be!

Suddenly she hears feet pounding behind her. Who would be on the canal path on such a night? Before she can react, a man is at her shoulders. A familiar face, film star handsome. He's actually stunning – tall and dark. Moving passed in a flash, his fluid muscles ripple. She catches a glimpse of shell-sharp cheekbones, dark hair. Where has she seen him? On TV, in the newspapers? Then she remembers. Bobby McGregor. The Falkirk Flyer's out training for his next Olympics! Silver isn't enough for him.

Watching his broad shoulders as he disappears into the distance, she imagines sharing a pool with him. Sharing a podium! Right, tomorrow she'll get that racing cap, maybe even googles.

Turn

A C Clarke

Thwack! The long snake of the whip ripples out under her horse's hooves. The mare's ears twitch. Marianne flinches. Higher, higher yells Madame, though to Marianne it seems as if her mount is already stepping higher than any ordinary horse. She'd chosen dressage because it was, so everyone said, the pinnacle of horsemanship, demonstrating complete harmony between horse and rider.

She'd been overjoyed to be accepted into Madame de Silva's training school – Madame de Silva, the doyenne of Olympic dressage. She'd been surprised that Madame had taken her on, but fees were fees, and Madame's were as top of the range as her reputation.

Thwack! Marianne flinches again. The mare lays back her ears. Should Madame crack the whip so often? She's like a ringmaster. Marianne thinks back to her old riding instructor's words – *Dancing horses! Just like the circus. It's not natural* – thinks back to the rides they used to have over the Downs, cantering free over the turf, their horses' ears pricked, horse and rider seemingly of one mind.

Thwack! Something in Marianne snaps. She turns her horse round, exits the ring, Madame's outraged cries lashing her back.

Well Balanced

M T Taylor

Family sobriquets carry an implication of admiration – the Musical one, the Sporty one, and so on. I would never be the Sporty one.

I had achieved a couple of respectable placings in class exams and might have been the Brainy one but for a remark from an aunt, short on plaudits herself.

Brainy? I'd say Cunning.

I remembered Aesop and felt all was not bad.

Still, there are tests every child must endure regardless of their talents – the sporty must do maths, the tone deaf must sing and, inevitably, everyone must compete on Sports Day.

And so I stood in line and tried to brave the condescension of all around.

The race was the Egg and Spoon, no challenge for those with speed in their limbs; no glory in winning, but probably shame in coming last. I needed a strategy. I had one.

At the starter's whistle, the runners ran. Eggs fell from spoons and, according to the rules, each runner had to stop and reunite eggs and spoons before continuing. Repeatedly, eggs fell and runners stopped. I did not run. At a steady stroll, me and my egg made it first to the finishing line without a drop.

There was no medal, but the smiles and disbelief on faces that had earlier held only pity was a prize worth Olympic gold.

Winning Is Not Everything

Antje Bothin

The ribbon danced around the floor. She pushed the device with force, while hovering over the ground like a fairy. Her dance moves hopefully would impress the judges. Now was the moment of truth, her performance at the competition, this important event.

She had spent months practising this routine. Since she had started dedicating her time to this sport as a child, she enjoyed it so much. Watching the Olympic Games inspired her at the time. Now, she was an athlete herself.

The music echoed around the air. She had chosen something cheerful and upbeat. Her feet moved around when she jumped up and down. She smiled with pride and confidence.

It has not always been like that. She used to be a shy child, anxious of other people's judgement.

The music finally stopped. It was done. She felt great, as she believed she managed to get through without mistakes. She smiled from ear to ear and awaited the results.

A glimpse of anxiety flared up in her mind, but she pushed it away quickly, and displayed a pose of victory.

Would she be first, or last, or anything in between? It suddenly did not matter anymore. It was a brilliant achievement to remember!

She still had the competitions using ball, hoop and clubs to look forward to.

About the Scribever

Colette Coen was a runner-up in the Mslexia Short Story Competition, with recent publication in their *Best Short Fiction 2023 Anthology*, *Five Glasgow Stories* and *Postbox*. Her short story collection – *Forgotten Dreams and Other Stories* – and novel – *All the Places I've Ever Been* – are available on Amazon. She is the

Federation of Writers (Scotland) Scriever for 2024. She lives near Glasgow where she runs Beech Editorial Services. Buy her a red wine and she'll tell you a story.

Facebook : [Colette Coen – writer – Facebook](#)

Instagram: @ColetteCoen

Website: <http://colettecoen.wordpress.com>