The quest for gold

Athletes driven to excel at all costs

"I think to be successful in sport you need to have tremendous talent, a tremendous work ethic, and tremendous good luck."

by David Jón Fuller

"The Olympics leaves its athletes broken souls." So said Canadian Olympian Mark Tewksbury. It's a quote that rang true for author Angie Abdou.

Abdou explores the pressure, victories and heartache of Olympic athletes in her new novel, *The Bone Cage*.

"I felt that it was really fruitful ground for a novel, because nothing has really been written about that world," Abdou says.

She eschews the standard sports story cliché of underdog-triumphs-in-the-end, and instead explores what goes into the making of an elite athlete.

"I think to be successful in sport you need to have tremendous talent, a tremendous work ethic and tremendous good luck," says Abdou.

Though she herself never competed at the Olympics, Abdou began speed swimming at four years old, continuing until she was 16. Originally from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, she did a BA in English at the University of Regina. She went on to graduate work in English at the University of Western Ontario.

At 26, Abdou returned to swimming and now competes at the Masters level.

Her first book was a collection of short stories called *Anything Boys Can Do*. Now, in *The Bone Cage*, she follows a swimmer, Sadie, and a wrestler, Tom, a.k.a. "Digger," who are headed for the 2000 Olympics — but not without seeing some of their friends fall behind.

Sadie and Digger meet while training at the University of Calgary. A mutual understanding — and growing attraction — draws them together. For the two, it's the last chance to compete at the Olympics.

Abdou says the all-or-nothing notion of winning a medal — and gold, at that — was one she obsessed over. Not for her own sake, but what she saw it do to other athletes.

She once congratulated swimmer Joanne Malar in Sydney after seeing her swim there. Malar was disappointed to have gotten fourth place.

"I said, 'But you broke a Canadian record.' She said, 'It doesn't matter — people back home expect medals, not Canadian records.'"

Both Sadie and Digger handle this expectation differently. Sadie begins to pry it open with questions; Digger prefers to block it out until after the Games.

For many athletes — including gold medalists like Tewksbury — it can be traumatic.

Not so for Abdou, who knows what a constant training regimen does to your life.

"But I still love swimming," she says. "I never had that pressure, that disappointment that comes at the end of an athletic career, because I never had those expectations."

Whether those expectations are worth it in the quest for gold is up to her characters — and ultimately her readers — to decide.

"As the athletes in this book find out, a goal slightly out of reach made sense at 16, 17; but at 33, when you've put your family life, your scholastic life, your career on hold, and your family has made sacrifices for you, suddenly you realize it was always slightly out of reach and it doesn't make that much sense." ❖

The Bone Cage
Angie Abdou
NeWest Press
$22.95 pb, 236 pages
ISBN-13: 978-1-897126-17-2

David Jón Fuller is Managing Editor of *Lögberg-Heimskringla,* the Icelandic community newspaper. His writing has appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press, Uptown Magazine,* and *The Icelandic Canadian Magazine.*

[more sports fiction]

Cross-Check!
Lorna Schultz Nicholson
This Wayne Gretzky-endorsed children's novel features returning characters, Josh, Peter and Sam, who reunite at a tournament but are now playing on different teams. Dany Heatley says this book reminds him of playing tournaments in his youth. "Lots of fun, friendships and awesome hockey action!"
(Lorimer, $8.95 pb, 128 pages, ISBN: 978-1-55028-968-3)

Growing Up Hockey: The Life and Times of Everyone Who Ever Loved the Game
Brian Kennedy
Amateur hockey is celebrated in this collection of stories by a college professor and freelance sportswriter who covers the L.A. Kings and the Anaheim Ducks. The stories lovingly recall everyone from hockey greats to neighbourhood rink bullies.
(Folklore, $19.95 pb, 370 pages, ISBN: 978-1-894864-65-7/1-894864-65-4)

Lawrence High Yearbook Series
David A. Poulsen
These books for young adults are set in Lawrence High, the "jock" school where sports rule. In *Wild Thing,* Book One, a hippie boy who doesn't fit in finds himself saving the day on the football field. In *Blind Date,* Book Two, a popular hockey player finds himself dating a blind girl.
(Key Porter, $7.95 pb, *Wild Thing,* 69 pages, ISBN: 978-1-55263-931-3/ 1-55263-931-2; *Blind Date*, 112 pages, ISBN: 978-1-55263-933-7/1-55263-933-9)

One Shot: How the Winnipeg Falcons Won the First Olympic Hockey Gold
Eric Zweig
The first team to win Olympic hockey gold was a group of Icelandic immigrants from Winnipeg, who endured years of prejudice before their famous triumph. Part of a sports series for reluctant readers, *One Shot* is full of hockey trivia and action, suitable for younger hockey fans.
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Cara Hedley
The rowdiness of a locker room gets a new twist in this novel about a women's hockey team, the Scarlets, a group of tough-talking individuals with a passion for the sport. The author played for the University of Manitoba Bisons for three seasons before obtaining an MA in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Calgary.
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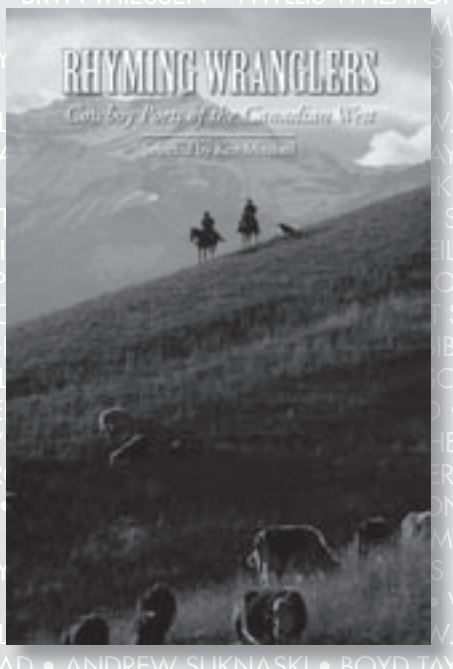

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