

Textual Portrayals of Female Athletes

Liberation or Nuanced Forms of Patriarchy?

VICTORIA CARTY

INTRODUCTION

Sport has been an area of society that has traditionally oppressed women by limiting their opportunity to participate. Mariah Nelson aptly reinforces this assertion: “We learned . . . that batting, catching, throwing, and jumping are not neutral, human activities, but somehow more naturally a male domain. Insidiously, our culture’s reverence for men’s professional sports and its silence about women’s athletic accomplishments shaped, defined, and limited how we felt about ourselves as women and men.”¹

Since the implementation of Title IX in 1972, women and girls’ participation has increased dramatically in sports and fitness, accompanied by broadening public support.² Participation has improved in team and individual sports, many of which had conventionally been limited to males.³ Female athletes have broken out of the stereotypical women-designated sports such as figure skating, gymnastics, and tennis. Girls and women now play football, rugby, ice hockey, and wrestle and box as well. In addition to the material benefits of opportunities and rewards that females gain, equally significant has been the uncovering of the construction of masculinity and the ideology of gender difference.⁴ At the same time, however, many recent textual portrayals of female athletes have raised interesting questions regarding these gains. For example, television commercials, print ads, and press coverage commonly focus more on the sexual appeal of female athletes and their “feminine” qualities than on their athletic achievements.

This research explores certain social changes that have accompanied the increasing popularity of women in sports and some of the ambiguous and contradictory messages in advertisements that these changes have spawned. The ads and much of the media coverage in general reflect a society in flux regarding gender roles and notions of femininity and feminism. For instance, many

of the ads and textual portrayals I analyze reveal a clear attempt to unify non-contradictory notions of feminism and femininity that, as Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon Smith claim, have given rise to an “aesthetically depoliticized feminism.”⁵ Many companies actively encourage manifold readings of ads to “recapture the attention of alienated viewers by encoding messages that are ambiguous, incomplete or polyvalent.”⁶ Critics argue that such portrayals exalt traditional feminine stereotypes and assumptions at the expense of feminist ideals and aspirations.

Other representations in advertising, however, contain a message that seems to acknowledge the achievements of the feminist movement, and hints that these should be pursued over traditional ideals of femininity. Although images of femininity and feminism often coexist within the same ad, what are perceived as more traditional feminine qualities (passivity, dependency, sensuousness, and an emphasis on family and relationships) are downplayed to promote feminist goals of independence, self-determination, assertiveness, control, and gender equality.

It is important to note, however, that several meanings of femininity can coexist at any given time and can mean different things to different people. Masculinity and femininity, of course, are not universal essences but are constructed through fluid meanings and behaviors. Another caveat that must be addressed in addition to the danger of rigid gender categorizations is an inflexible projection of feminism. A reliance on such rigidity can obscure how the ads are connected to the production of meanings. I refer to “depoliticized” and “politicized” feminism as ideal types for the necessary purpose of conceptualization, while remaining cognizant of the fluidity of gender boundaries. In many of the representations discussed here, female athletes combine contradictory stereotypes, thereby renegotiating dichotomous traits of strength-objectification and athleticism-passivity.

Of course, such analysis would be incomplete without a consideration of how definitions of femininity and stereotypes of beauty are racialized. Race intersects with gender and sexuality in complex ways in the cultural venues examined here. It plays a critical role in influencing which athletes are sexualized and for what purposes. The fact that the sexuality of black females is often marginalized in mainstream media portrayals reflects the different historical experiences of white and black women. Thus, the characteristics that are deemed “appropriately feminine” are different for white and nonwhite athletes.

In drawing from various strands of feminist theory to help explain the convoluted messages in much of the press coverage and the way that female athletes are depicted in certain segments of the mass media, the obvious starting point is to acknowledge some of the gains of liberal feminism. The struggle

undertaken by activists within this tradition brought about Title IX and other forms of legislation that opened the doors to institutions from which women had traditionally been excluded. Socialist feminism can render insights into how gendered portrayals of athletes are manipulated by marketers and feed into the capitalist system.

The most useful theoretical contribution of this analysis is situated in the debate between radical feminist and postfeminist perspectives. The radical feminist critique is helpful in demonstrating how patriarchal intuitions create myths and forms of social organization that constrain women to exist in male-centered worlds.⁷ From this standpoint, the willingness of athletes to display their bodies and accentuate feminine traits and heterosexuality takes away from their athletic achievement and status as athletes and problematizes the view of gender as a social construction. This complicity reinforces the system of male domination through the objectification and exploitation of women. From a postfeminist perspective, many athletes and consumers view the use of sex appeal by women as empowering. Since the victories of the feminist movement are taken for granted, these women presume the right to equitable treatment.⁸ Additionally, to distance themselves from being labeled feminists, many attempt to reinforce their femininity and heterosexuality to underscore gender differences.

Underlying this debate is the dialectical relationship between agency and social structure.⁹ From a radical feminist point of view, though women gain some individual material benefits by using sex appeal, this is within the confines of a male-dominated system that determines what is feminine and appealing. Therefore, the system will remain unchallenged, and the goal of gender equality is undermined. From a postfeminist stance, women are using their bodies as a form of liberation, and their own decisions to display their bodies demonstrate that they are in fact in control of how the images are projected. Rather than seeing the system as confining, they recognize and capitalize on its opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This study engages content analysis of textual portrayals of female athletes to examine certain cultural themes. I collected television commercials during the debut of the women's soccer team in the 1996 Summer Olympics, the 1999 Women's World Cup tournament, the 2000 women's NCAA basketball tournament, and regular-season Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) games in 2001 and 2002. These highly publicized sporting events, which aired on ESPN, ESPN2, and NBC, were chosen because I assumed they

probably would include ads that feature female athletes. Since women's sports draw a predominantly female audience, it would seem logical that companies targeting female audiences would advertise during these events. Specific commercials were selected because in various ways they illustrate the new and changing notions of femininity and feminism.

I also analyzed print advertisements from *Gear*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Women's Sport and Fitness*, and *The National Sports Review*. Three of these magazines cater to a predominantly male audience. Each of the selected images depicts female athletes as sex objects in some capacity. I would argue that these characterizations are constructed in a way that sexualizes the athletes to appeal to the male audience. The one ad featured in a magazine targeting female consumers, however, is more representative of women's empowerment and feminist goals. Issues regarding messages directed at the intended audiences are discussed in more detail throughout the manuscript.

The selected items for analysis were chosen not randomly but with a specific purpose in mind, because the focus of this research is exploratory in nature and oriented toward an in-depth study of a particular trend. The intention was not to pick the "average" or "typical" advertisement or text or to select cases with the intent of representing all media portrayals. I selected unique cases that are especially informative to gain a deeper understanding of a certain theme. Exploratory research like this is beneficial because we can form some tentative propositions that in future research may be formalized and analyzed more rigorously. Complete random sampling, including a comparison across different networks and magazines, would make for interesting follow-up research but is beyond the scope of this endeavor.

WOMEN IN SPORTS, ENDORSEMENT DEALS, AND THEIR TEXTUAL IMAGES

As the number of women participating in sports grows, the media coverage of their events has increased, generating considerable visibility and respect for female athletes. Perhaps one of the most notable events was the unprecedented attention the women's 1999 World Cup team received after winning the championship game against China. This ranged from a series of pop culture escapades to political events: some of the members of the team appeared on talk shows, including David Letterman and Jay Leno; Disneyland staged a parade for the team; and team captain Judy Foudy sat next to Hillary Clinton during President Clinton's 1999 State of the Union address.¹⁰

After winning the championship, the female soccer players were granted a five-year contract with the U.S. Soccer Federation to establish a professional league. Even more impressive, the salary for the players would be equivalent to

their male counterparts, though this may be partly attributable to the very low salaries of male soccer players.¹¹ Not only did the teams earn a league of their own (though it has been recently cancelled) and widespread TV coverage of women's soccer, but many team members were also sought out by major corporations to endorse their products. For example, Mia Hamm, the world's leading scorer in women's soccer, won contracts with Nike and Gatorade worth an estimated one million dollars.¹² The team obtained significant print media coverage. For example, when *The National Sports Review* dedicated a 1999 issue to "athletes of the year," the women's World Cup team topped the list.

Two other sports that have gained significant popularity are women's professional basketball and tennis. Women got their own basketball league, the WNBA, in 1997, and it now has sixteen teams. In 2003 the WNBA and the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA) announced the league's first collective bargaining agreement.¹³ Sheryl Swoops was the first WNBA player to have a shoe named after her, like Michael Jordan, who was the first male athlete; both arrangements were Nike contracts.

The extraordinary success of Serena and Venus Williams has helped to make tennis arguably the most popular women's sport.¹⁴ Serena won the U.S. Open in 1999, and her sister won Wimbledon and the U.S. Open in 2000 and 2001. Venus won the gold medal in women's singles at the Sydney Olympics, and she partnered with Serena to capture the gold in the doubles match. The two sisters have faced each other in the championship round of four straight Grand Slam events. Serena, who won each event, is now ranked the number one player in the world. Their status as world-class athletes has spilled over into their role as celebrities. Venus now has a \$40 million five-year deal with Reebok, the largest single endorsement deal ever for a female athlete. Her income off the court is \$12.9 million; Serena's is \$7.8 million.¹⁵

These contracts indicate how the popularity of women's sports has altered the way marketers pursue endorsers for their products. Bob Williams, head of sports marketing consultants Burns Sports Chicago, articulates the change in marketing strategies as follows: "There's a tremendous shift going on: You're seeing more advertisers use top women athletes to connect with consumers. Male jocks are losing endorsements to female stars, such as the Williams sisters, Marion Jones, Michelle Kwan, Mia Hamm, Gabrielle Reece and Anna Kournikova."¹⁶

These endorsement contracts have led to a growing number of female athletes featured in both print and television commercials. As they venture into traditional male territory, the issue of how gender is used to appeal to consumers becomes complex. In the culture industry, the women's bodies have served as one of the most important sites for the accumulation of capital

among the powerful, almost exclusively male, elites who control and own the cultural institutions.¹⁷ Over the past few decades, changing portrayals of feminism and femininity have come to represent a range of strategies for capturing market share. The most recent shift features athletes who embrace new notions of femininity that include muscles, strength, fitness, and competitiveness. This is a move away from traditional depictions of vulnerability, fragility, dependence, and subservience.¹⁸ However, as we will see, these notions of femininity and feminism in some instances vary across racial groups.

Although women's bodies are still a main focus of attention, their bodies represent a new kind of self-discipline—one in which the body is trained to be used for performance rather than as an object of desire. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf argued that the then contemporary ideal of beauty encouraged conformity to a virtually unattainable, unhealthy, and unnatural standard of thinness and beauty.¹⁹ The introduction of new standards of beauty by athletes may have a positive effect on the physical health and self-esteem of young girls and women. In emulating their favorite sports stars, girls may attain a sense of pride and accomplishment in their bodies, rather than striving to resemble fashion models by starving themselves.²⁰ However, at times the strong, powerful bodies women have attained to enhance their performance are concurrently transformed into objects of desire. At issue is whether this is merely a new way to sexualize women's (now toned) bodies or whether a new gender paradigm may be emerging—one that redefines femininity in which girls can be strong and feminine simultaneously.

IMAGES OF A DEPOLITICIZED FEMINISM

Bodyism, Nudity, and Sex Appeal

When Brandi Chastain ripped off her jersey after securing the final goal at the 1999 World Cup championship game, she drew an incredible amount of media attention, and her value as an endorser soared. The photo of her sitting back on her heels, kneeling on the ground with her arms raised in triumph while waving her shirt was splashed all over the print and TV media. Some were concerned that this portrayal drew as much attention, if not more, as her feat of scoring the winning goal. Though this was most likely a spontaneous act (it is the norm in men's soccer after scoring a goal), other athletes have pursued marketing exploits that purposely accentuate their sexuality in addition to, or in some cases rather than, their athleticism. The question is whether this advances or distracts from the gains of the feminist movement in the struggle for gender equality. In a 1999 *Gear* advertisement for Nike, Chastain posed nude (except for her Nike cleats). She explained that she was showing off the muscles

and toned body she had earned through intense physical training and that her appearance in the photo did not objectify her body. Rather, it was a statement of athleticism and strength. When asked to comment, she responded, “Hey, I ran my butt off for this body. I’m proud of it.”²¹

Jenny Thompson, heralded by many as the greatest female swimmer ever, posed topless for *Sports Illustrated* in the summer of 2000. She strategically covered her breasts with two clenched fists, and declared that the purpose of the photo was to show off her muscles rather than to promote any kind of sex appeal. Like Chastain, she described her pose as about strength, fitness, and the beauty of muscles, not about sex. Both claimed their bodies were not objects to be scrutinized as a commodity of desire but to be respected for what they had accomplished. Chastain and Thompson are blond, white, and physically fit females—the ideal image of male fantasy. Because they fit the traditional notion of femininity across these lines, their muscles are not seen as threatening. They are afforded the luxury of being perceived as both strong and attractive. *Gear* and *Sports Illustrated* target a predominantly male readership base. Though nudity may be empowering for Chastain and Thompson as individuals, this type of pose is situated perfectly within the confines of what the male gaze deems as “appropriately feminine.” From a socialist feminist perspective, it also generates revenue for the male-dominated segment of the magazine industry.

From a postfeminist perspective, these endeavors are perceived as empowering and liberating. This would support Goldman, Heath, and Smith’s argument that although casting women’s bodies as the site of pleasure and desire serves to fetishize women’s parts as objects of desire, it can also allow women to revalue their own bodies as a source of pleasure, freedom, and legitimation in their own terms and as a resource for their own power.²² Holly Bruback similarly argues that muscles entail a sense of self-possession: “It’s not sex appeal conferred on a woman, as it’s conferred on supermodels. The athlete has come by her powers of attraction honestly. It is a healthy type of fetishism that teaches us to appreciate women’s bodies in detail. Women, as they have gradually come into their own, have at last begun to feel at home in their bodies, which previously they were only renting.”²³

Some athletes do not necessarily pose nude but still perpetuate the sexualization of female athletes by emphasizing their femininity over their accomplishments as competitors. For example, Anna Kournikova was, until very recently, the highest-earning player in women’s tennis. She is worth over ten million dollars in endorsements, though she has never won a major tournament.²⁴ And she aggressively accentuates her sex appeal over her athletic ability. In a commercial for Berlei sports bras in which she was recently featured,

the tagline read, "Only the ball should bounce." Kournikovas's ability to profit from her sensuality and eroticism highlights the importance of marketability and how corporate interests have a hand in promoting certain gendered representations. To acquire sponsors, female athletes are pressured to present an image not only of health, vitality, and physical attractiveness but also of feminine beauty and obedience to traditionally feminine standards of behavior.²⁵

Corporate marketers are currently targeting endorsers for the upcoming Winter Olympics. Bobsled driver Jean Racine is being pursued for her "magnetic blend of sex appeal, salty wholesomeness and spunk."²⁶ The agent for figure skater Michelle Kwan states, "She may not be the most dynamic performer . . . but she doesn't have to be. She presents an elegant, classy personal style that advertisers have gravitated to."²⁷ Though Kwan is an Asian American, her relatively light skin and body type appeals to the traditional notions of femininity exalted by white mainstream society. Also, the stereotype of female Asians as "the model minority" and their supposed subservience to male authority and exotic qualities allow Kwan to fit within the mold of white femininity.

The integration of notions of feminism and femininity has generated new ideological contradictions. In the case of athletes posing nude, meanings of choice and individual freedom become tied to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their own interests: "The commercial marriage of feminism and femininity plays off a conception of personal freedom located in the visual construction of self-appearance. Body and sexuality emerge as coincidental signs: the body is something you shape, control . . . to validate yourself as an autonomous being capable of will power and discipline. Sexuality appears as something women exercise by choice rather than because of their ascribed gender role."²⁸

However, from a radical feminist perspective, it is questionable whether objectified female sexuality should be perceived or celebrated as a personal achievement. Although personal strength can be a marker of female independence, this strength can also be refigured as a means to attain sexual attractiveness. The message is that self-acceptance, confidence, strength, and the dismantling of forces of male domination can be attained through commodified body images. Radical feminists reject femininity (attraction to men) as status and strategy in favor of genuine gender equity and autonomy from male-defined sexuality.²⁹ Though women may be voluntarily posing to show off their muscular bodies, these new body types had to be first accepted by men and then be transfigured into images of sexuality. Thus, female athletes are marketed as an object of male fantasy. The reliance on sexuality rather than athletic

accomplishment to gain attention may take away from their integrity as athletes.

Also, from a radical feminist position, the use of sex appeal to earn status and income translates feminism into an act of using one's body as one sees fit, as opposed to a political movement that seeks gender equality at the structural and institutional level. The financial incentives and payoffs are, of course, an important attraction and arguably work to the advantage of individual teams and athletes. However, postfeminists have overlooked the fact that men do not have to rely on such strategies because the institution of sport has historically privileged them and excluded women. Thus, the structural arrangements that generate and perpetuate sexism tend to go unacknowledged. Although posing nude may be perceived as an act of empowerment, it is inherently tied to institutional arrangements. When women explicitly promote and play into the image of the glamorous, sexy, and objectified female body to gain financial rewards and prestige on the basis of their looks, they may hinder institutional and societal advances for women as a minority group. Title IX was designed to give women access to resources and opportunities to participate in sport. At the professional level, this can provide financial rewards and prestige—based presumably on merit. However, when women use their recognition as athletes for personal benefit, not for athletic skill but because men find them attractive, this may serve as a drawback to the liberal feminist agenda. Though attractiveness does not go unmentioned for male athletes, it is usually a sidelight to their major athletic accomplishments. Few, if any, get media attention solely on the basis of their sex appeal. For men, beauty is not a prerequisite to reap the material benefits of endorsement contracts that corporations so eagerly seek.

This is true of race as well. Black female athletes must prove themselves as athletes first, and sexuality is either marginalized or framed very differently. Blacks have always been stereotyped as more physical than intellectual, praised for their natural abilities and physicality.³⁰ Because black women were denied access to full-time homemaking and sexual protection, they did not tie femininity to a specific, limited set of activities and attributes defined as separate and opposite from masculine. Therefore, black women historically have been situated outside dominant culture's definition of acceptable (white) femininity, and black womanhood is viewed very differently.³¹ This may be why mainstream preoccupation with racial stereotypes of black athletic prowess supersedes the perception of black women's sexuality. Black women athletes are seen as more athletic than white women, so their femininity is discounted as irrelevant.

A number of recent television commercials also illustrate the mixed or polyvalent messages regarding femininity and feminism. "If You Let Me Play," an

ad for Nike Corporation that ran during the 1996 Summer Olympics soccer competition, begins with a mix of white, black, and Asian girls playing on the swing set, monkey bars, and a merry-go-round. One is shown passively holding onto rings. Most are wearing dresses or bathing suits. In some shots the girls appear docile, sitting while fixing one another's hair. They take turns reciting the long-term advantages of overall social and individual well-being through participation in sports. They claim that "If you let me play,"

I will like myself more, have more self-confidence
Be 60 percent less likely to get breast cancer
Suffer less depression
Be more likely to leave a man who beats me
Be less likely to get pregnant before I want to
Learn what it means to be strong.

Again, this ad has a curious ambiguity to it. Based on the lyrics, the girls are striving to be self-reliant, competent, healthy, and strong. Yet, their physical depiction, in dresses and bathing suits, and their demeanor of physical inactivity and conformity to a scripted message seem to negate these aspirations. Also, the phrase "If you let me play" inherently implies the need for permission.

Another advertisement for Nike is entitled "I CAN." This ran during the 2000 NCAA tournament. The statement "I CAN" continually flashes across the screen and is followed by a sequence of completed statements to the initial phrase. The first frame is a close-up of a young black girl's face as she swings, and the caption reads she can "Endure Life." A white male gymnast is then shown hanging on the rings as "Master Pain . . . Endure Pain" flashes. This is followed by a black female weight lifter who is grimacing in pain. Across the screen we read, "I Can Be Strong." Then, a black teenage girl stares into the camera with a hand over her mouth and giggles, as the script reads, "I Can Be the Next Jordan." After a Brazilian male soccer player scores a goal, he jumps into the arms of one of his teammates and pumps his clenched fist. Next, a Brazilian female soccer fan, wearing a Renaldo jersey, dances provocatively in front of the fans. The next shot juxtaposes Brazilian male musicians beating drums in celebration with white police officers in their protective riot gear looking on. The caption reads, "I Can Celebrate without Rioting." A male hockey player then crashes onto the ice after a brutal collision. As his mouthpiece floats into the air we learn he can "Give More Than Just Sweat." The ad then cuts to a small black boy in football gear, being dragged along by another player in a failed attempt to tackle his opponent. "I Can Hang On" flashes

across the screen. The next segment shows a small white boy who looks up at a rope hanging from the ceiling that he is expected to climb. We are informed he can “Be Afraid of Nothing.” The final shot returns to the black female lifting weights. The tag line reads, “I Know I Can.”

In this ad, both genders “can endure.” However, while black women are striving to endure life, white men are enduring (and mastering) pain. Both can “aspire,” but a young black female giggles at this apparently trivial demand, while white boys are “afraid of nothing.” Both males and females “can celebrate,” yet for black women this means sexually explicit dancing, as opposed to running and jumping into the air in celebration. In this commercial women take on a more subdued, somewhat erotic approach to athletics, while men sacrifice their bodies through acts of violence and aggression. The implication is that females are expected to appear feminine and sensual. In contrast, males are rewarded for athletic accomplishments and victories. This supports Nelson’s claim that although women receive serious coverage more often than they did in the past, they are still portrayed as silly, sexy, uncoordinated, or unlikely athletes.³²

No white women appear anywhere in the entire ad, and the images of black females are contradictory. The young blacks are passive, attempting to “endure life” and giggling at the thought of becoming a great athlete like Michael Jordan. Yet, the adult black female actively lifts weights and “can be strong,” and “knows she can.” She is in no way sexualized—all the focus is on her anguished expression and bulky muscles as she lifts. There are also contradictory images across racial lines for the males in the ad. While the young black football player “hangs on,” the young white boy is “afraid of nothing.” For many disadvantaged black youth in the United States, hanging on is the best they can hope for, while their white counterparts have life experiences that allow them to believe they can succeed and overcome any potential obstacles. As adults, black males and females act as entertainers and “can celebrate,” but they are being closely monitored by a white police force to make sure that they do not riot. This is representative of the stereotype of African Americans as animalistic, naturally great entertainers and athletes, and potential criminals when they become adults.

Although women in sports challenge the association between masculinity and sport, many female media representations confirm gender differences through an emphasis on femininity in addition to, or in some instances rather than, athletic strengths.³³ This process of feminization constructs differences between female and male athletes and diverts challenges to the gender order.³⁴ These two commercials are examples of how the expansion of gender roles for women (at least for white women) is still limited through the emphasis on tra-

ditional notions of femininity. (The reading of the second ad, however, indicates that there is more of an expansion for black females, because their strength is not threatening to traditional definitions of femininity and beauty.)

RELATIONSHIPS AND HETEROSEXUALITY AS A WAY
TO CERTIFY FEMININITY

Many hope that women's participation in sport (and particularly in team contact sports) may serve as a harbinger of challenges to patriarchal hegemony. As the physical capabilities that once distinguished men and women continue to decline, there is an effort among men and complicity among some coaches and athletes to accentuate feminine traits. To avoid being seen as overly masculine or lesbian, female athletes will often participate in their own construction as exceptionally feminine.³⁵

The emphasis on heterosexual relationships is blatant in women's sports, and particularly in those sports that have been traditionally dominated by men. Stereotypes about female athletes being lesbians are pervasive in the world of sport.³⁶ As *white* women became strong and muscular, this devalued their identity as women and reduced their chances for finding a husband because of the physical threat that they posed to men. Though there is more acceptance of strong women today, there is still an effort to hide homosexuality and to stress feminine qualities.

The obsession with profit is a significant driving force in the backlash against lesbianism, as is the desire for coaches and athletes to gain support from men. Elizabeth Etue and Megan K. Williams's research concluded that homophobia is prevalent in women's hockey because of concerns among sponsors of women's hockey regarding the marketability of sport, the league, and its players.³⁷ Many female athletes are coached by media consultants on how to dress and behave in a traditionally feminine fashion when making public appearances.³⁸ Many marketing ploys entail an overt or covert statement about heterosexuality that reinforces the centrality of relationships in women's lives. When symbols of traditional stereotypes of femininity are used together with symbols representing feminism, this again leads to polyvalent and somewhat ambiguous readings of the text. For example, when World Cup team captain Judy Foudy posed for the 2000 swimsuit issue in *Sports Illustrated*, she was shown running on the beach alongside her husband, holding onto his arm. Foudy is hardly a typical *Sports Illustrated* model. She is of average weight, muscular, and actively competing with her husband to gain control of a soccer ball. Yet she is barely dressed and posing in an issue of a magazine specifically dedicated to women exhibiting their bodies for a primarily male audience.

Since the audience for *Sports Illustrated* is overrepresented by male sports enthusiasts and the magazine is owned and controlled by white males, this is of course a typical photo in that it appeals to the majority of the creators and readers of the text.

Thus, images of aggression, physicality, confrontation, and control are interspersed with those of dependency, relationships, sensuousness, and bodyism. That they are presented in a noncontradictory way makes notions of both femininity and feminism aesthetically appealing. Although nothing is wrong with representing women as at once strong and beautiful, when the two images are juxtaposed with one another in the context of a publication like *Sports Illustrated*, appearance can take precedence over accomplishment. While some may interpret the photo as one of a great athlete who also happens to be posing for the swimsuit issue, others may see it as a beautiful, feminine, heterosexual woman who happens to play soccer. Also, the presence of her husband, to whom she is holding on to for support, can be read to suggest the importance of relationships in women's lives and their dependence on men. From a radical feminist perspective, the inclusion of her husband in the picture takes away from her as an athlete and her own individual accomplishments.

Other ads convey a more covert implication that relationships are an integral part of the feminine identity. A television commercial for Nike Corporation called "Soccer Vows" aired during the 1996 Olympics. Mia Hamm begins a chant that will be replicated by her teammates after a high-pitched scream. She exclaims,

We are flesh, and we are blood, and we are bound together
For better or worse
In sickness and in health
Through thick and through thin
In good times and in bad
Until death or the world championship title do us part.

This ad exemplifies physical and mental intensity, toughness, determination, and concentration. As the team recites the vows, there are images of them in action—sliding in the mud, diving for loose balls, bodies colliding, and in other forms of intense physical exertion. Close-up images of their faces highlight the intensity of their thought processes as well. However, there is an implicit theme of the importance of relationships and intimacy (the institution of marriage manifested through soccer). Team members are portrayed as dependent on one another and fulfilling a sacred type of commitment to others. Since this ad was shown during the Olympics and it was the first time the U.S. team performed in the soccer competition, there was most likely a fairly sub-

stantial male audience. Such an ad can be read as empowering for women on the one hand, yet the underlying theme does not stray too far from conventional gender roles and concerns. This is perhaps an intentional strategy by Nike to make sure that male viewers are not threatened by women invading too far onto their turf.

An ad for the WNBA that ran in 2002 with the tagline “Basketball Is Beautiful” promoted an upcoming play-off game. Lyrics to the slow, therapeutic music in the background repeatedly announce, “You must be my soul sister, soul sister, soul sister.” The theme of relationships through sisterhood combined with images of women as serious, intense competitors on the one hand, and emotional, sensual women on the other. The ad begins with a shot of one black and one white player standing nearly back-to-back, with arms crossed and intense expressions as they stare directly into the camera. Neither notices as a basketball rolls across the screen. This is followed by close-up facial shots of a white and a black player, respectively. The two players’ gazes are diverted from the camera as they look down. Then we are shown another black female player looking up from the floor. This is followed by a lengthy clip focusing on the white player’s neck, her ponytail hanging down. After this segment, another black female looks at the viewer directly and inquisitively, with an expression of at least partial approval. The camera cuts to a stoic black player standing rigidly, again with arms crossed, as another basketball is rolled across the screen undetected. The last shot shows another black player outwardly smiling and laughing and we are told, “Basketball Is Beautiful.”

One could interpret this ad as the white athlete being sexualized by the black athletes so as to become “soul sisters.” The African Americans in the ad are transformed from unemotional, “mannish” looking competitors to giggling, easygoing females accepting of white femininity. Since the WNBA is dominated by blacks, there is a good chance that this ad was created to appeal to a broader (white) audience by showing the “feminine” side of black athletes. To gain the acceptance of white mainstream society, blacks have demonstrated that they are nonthreatening and in fact “sisters” of the white players. One could also interpret the message of the ad to mean that this bonding comes through blacks’ acceptance and approval of notions of white femininity and beauty.

COMMENTARY AND PRESS COVERAGE OF WOMEN’S SPORTS IN THE MASS MEDIA

Another way men have responded to changing notions of femininity is by using institutional arrangements that they control to further feminize athletes.³⁹ A blatant example of the feminization of athletes was David Letterman’s refer-

ences to the players on the women's World Cup team as "soccer mamas" and "babe city." More systematically, commentary on sporting events often serves to solidify the gender divide. For example, to downplay masculine qualities commentators tend to make such comments as "she's really strong, but still feminine."⁴⁰ As Nelson points out, the word "but" serves to downplay the former, and the females' strength becomes sexualized. Their muscles come to symbolize sexual attractiveness and beauty rather than power. In this way, female athleticism is redefined as sexy or romantic and intended for men's pleasure rather than for women's health, enjoyment, or empowerment.

Michael Messner and Faye Linda Wachs's comparative analysis of televised coverage of the "Final Four" of the women's and men's NCAA basketball tournaments observes noticeable differences.⁴¹ For the men's pregame show the coverage featured teenage boys playing a game of HORSE, enticing each other to do increasingly difficult shots. There was coverage of the dramatic events that led to the upcoming game. Members of both teams were interviewed as were experts analyzing each team's strengths and weaknesses, accompanied by sophisticated and entertaining graphics. The women's pregame segment opened with a clip from the television show *Designing Women*. It stated, "Our players, too, are women with designs, designs on a national championship." The opening program is in the image of a red rose. No postgame interviews or coverage of net cutting took place after the women's games as they had for the men's.⁴² The celebration of the winning team, the camera's focus after men's games, was also absent from the women's games. Rather, the media coverage concentrated on the emotionally upset expressions of the players on the losing team, often in tears.

Print coverage of female accomplishments exhibit a similar trend to appropriate images of women in sport as sexy and seductive. For example, the 1999 edition of *The National Sports Review*, which featured the women's World Cup championship team as the top-ranked "athletes of the year," had a separate section that featured "Divas in Sport." This section included tennis players Anna Kournikova and the Williams sisters, volleyball player Gabrielle Reece, boxer Mia St. John, basketball player Lisa Leslie, and soccer player Brandi Chastain. The segment on Kournikova lists the "top 10 reasons why we love Anna." Nine of the reasons refer to sex appeal and fashionable dress, and one states, because "she plays pretty good tennis." This is the only reference to her athletic ability. References to femininity are also replete in the write-up on Reece, who is a former model. She is described as a "cover girl," "fitness queen," "fashion model," and "athlete as Cosmo Girl." Although she was named the Top Offensive Player on the four-person tour of the pro beach circuit two times, this is never mentioned.

Coverage of the other athletes has a slightly different slant. The magazine notes that St. John, who is black, has posed nude for *Playboy* and states that “Mia’s hot!” However, the main highlight is on her accomplishments as an athlete, noting that she is undefeated and knocked out her opponent during the undercard of the De La Hoya-Trinidad fight. Los Angeles Sparks player Leslie, who is also black, is pictured fighting for a rebound against an opponent. She is acknowledged in the opening statements as looking awesome in high heels and is described as a “mega-hottie.” She is also commended for being one of the prime motivators in the growth of women’s professional basketball. Similarly, the spot on Chastain begins with the statement “Sports bras rule!” but then turns the attention toward her achievements as a soccer player. In each of these segments, it is difficult to tease out athletic from sexual objectification.

Regardless of race, for each of these performers, the magazine mentions both sex appeal and athleticism. In the shot of the Williams sisters, however, the summary focuses solely on the new era they brought to women’s tennis. It depicts them together holding an award with their powerful flexed arms very prominent. Although the Williamses, like Kournikova, do have endorsement contracts and often draw comments for their unique outfits, their role as strong, powerful, and accomplished athletes takes precedence over their sexuality.

Delia Douglas examines how the mass-mediated accounts of Venus and Serena placed them outside prominent conceptions of womanhood.⁴³ They have been labeled “childish” because of their beads, Venus “possessing the wingspan of a condor,” and Serena a “heavyweight fighter,” “huge,” and “the most physically imposing player in tennis.” The sisters have also been described as “masculine,” “aggressive,” “rugby lock forward,” “pummeling,” “overwhelming,” “overpowering,” and “predator one and predator two.”⁴⁴ They are portrayed as lacking those features attributed to the norm of white heterosexual femininity, legitimatizing the power and privilege of “appropriate” white heterosexuality—that is, femininity.⁴⁵ These descriptions highlight the fact that black athletes are rarely celebrated as both feminine and strong; their muscles supersede their beauty and sex appeal.

Another part of the different focus across racial lines may result from tennis’s history as an almost exclusively white sport, and aside from Billy Jean King, one of the athletic fields where traditional notions of femininity are celebrated and rewarded in terms of dress and appearance. The WNBA and boxing, on the other hand, are dominated by black athletes. Therefore, since they are not encroaching on what is perceived as a “white” and very “feminine” sport, the commentators for *The National Sports Review* may feel more at liberty to acknowledge the attractiveness of black female athletes participating in

these sports, but only within a certain realm ascertained by those who control the media.

Also, this magazine is a male-centered magazine that targets a largely male audience. This may explain why some of the athletes included in the lists are not the top athletes within their respective sports (Kournikova being the most obvious). The targeted audience is also relevant in that it is highly unlikely a similar segment on “divas” would be included in a magazine targeting a predominantly female audience. There is also no section dedicated to male athletes that are exceptionally good-looking or considered to be among the sexiest competitors.

IMAGES OF A POLITICIZED FEMINISM

Though they seem less prevalent, some textual and media images emphasize a more politicized form of feminism and either blur the distinction between masculinity and femininity or see them as trivial. They also encourage women to recognize and push forward the accomplishments of the feminist movement on an individual and institutional level. For example, a WNBA television advertisement featuring Rebecca Lobo of the New York Liberty shows her shooting alone in the gym. Her voice-over explains that her original dream was to be the first woman to play for the Boston Celtics. Now that the WNBA has been established, she no longer has that desire. In a mock apology, she informs the coach of the Boston Celtics that “she is booked.” The message is that women no longer have to seek permission from men to participate in sports, or to conform to male standards and accommodate their aspirations within male structures. They can be self-reliant and independent from men in an institutional setting. This type of agency is very different from the one advocated by female athletes who use their bodies for sexuality and distance themselves from the goals of feminism. Since the intent of this ad is to sell the WNBA and it most likely targets a largely female audience, it can risk emphasizing female empowerment without the threat of a backlash among male viewers. Also, male viewers of the WNBA are more likely to be drawn to the event out of appreciation of the sport rather than for the sexual appeal of the players.

Another ad that celebrates feminist ideals above traditional stereotypes of femininity is a Nike ad that featured Mia Hamm after the 1999 World Cup championship. It begins with a close-up of her face and her voice-over narrates:

There is a girl being born in America
And someone will tell her she is beautiful

And someone will tell her she is strong
Someone will tell her she is precious
And someone will say she is tough
There is a girl being born in America
And someone will give her a doll
And someone will give her a ball
And then someone will give her a chance.

Meanwhile, small girls are shown engaged in these dichotomous roles. Some girls are shown playing soccer, softball, sliding into base, pulling down a rebound, and driving to the basketball hoop. Interjected are images of girls in more traditionally feminine activities: a young white girl dressed as a ballerina, an Asian girl hugging her doll, a few other white girls playing dress up, and a small black girl wearing heart-shaped sunglasses applying lipstick. Though the narrative phrases the descriptions of the girls in terms of binaries, those qualities deemed “feminine” are not the ones viewers are encouraged to foster. The commercial is implying that gender differences exist because they are constructed through the process of socialization. Sport is one avenue that may allow girls to take on more masculine qualities to reach their full potential and to compete on an equal basis with men.

A commercial for a Gatorade ad entitled “Is It In You?” shown during the NCAA tournament uses the *American Woman* soundtrack as a backdrop to images of female athleticism. It stars a number of racially mixed, prominent athletes including Marion Jones, Mia Hamm, Billy Jean King and a host of female boxers, softball players, and WNBA ballplayers. Close-ups of faces are combined with intense athletic moments for celebrity black and white athletes. In each scene, the athletes are serious, active, competitive, aggressive, and sweaty. In one scene, two black basketball teammates are shown chest-bumping in celebration, replicating the tradition widely practiced by male basketball players. This reinforces the notion of black females as more physical and masculine than white females. Meanwhile, the lyrics to *American Woman* that accompany the visual images read, “American woman, stay away from me. American woman, mama let me be . . . / Coloured lights can hypnotize/ Sparkle someone else’s eyes.” These lyrics indicate a rejection of stereotyped gender roles based on seduction and artificial forms of glamour.

A recent six-page Nike print advertisement featured in *Women’s Sports and Fitness* magazine and in other women’s mainstream magazines asks, “Who Are Your Heroes?” The first page queries, “Did you name any women?” It explains that if not, then this is most likely because females are not shown. The second page features a girl in a baseball cap who looks as if she is about to throw a

pitch. The caption asks whether she will try to emulate thin models in magazines, whether she will think that independence makes her less desirable, and if she will lower her expectations because she has no women to look up to. The third frame ponders why idealized images of women make girls want to change themselves. There are two photos of a fashion doll with a very thin body and makeup and hair that is so overdone that the artificiality of the doll is striking. The viewer is informed that if females work out they are apt to be more self-assured, confident, proud of themselves, and more beautiful—all of which foster self-acceptance.

On the fourth page a young girl dressed in a light pink summer dress is playing makeup. She is holding a mirror close to her face, puckering her lips to examine her lipstick in a pristine, all-white setting that has a very artificial look to it. The last scripted message asks whether she will grow up “questioning the things we don’t.” The point is that by playing sports girls reap not only the benefits of health but also the self-assurance and confidence to pose questions about and change “the things that bother you” and to make a difference in the lives of generations of women to come. The last page contains a photo of a young girl in a wilderness setting in a very casual flannel-like dress that hangs down below her knees, wearing Teva sandals. She has an all-natural look with strings of hair falling from her ponytail and bangs that fall long and uneven. Rather than posing for the camera she has a very natural and relaxed smile—one that indicates a sense of contentment with who she is and her appearance. In this ad, dieting, makeup, and artificiality are contrasted with images of wholesomeness and health, with the former implicitly discredited. The message provides a new way for girls to think about themselves and what it means to be female.

All of the actors and images in this ad are white females, and the messages are most likely intended for a largely white audience. Many black females have had to be independent, regardless of how this might affect their desirability. If there is a shortage of white female role models, until recently there have been few female athletes, black or white, to serve as role models for girls of either race. Also, the things “to be questioned” and the things “that bother females” contrast rather starkly across the racial divide. For example, access to decent education, healthcare, affordable housing, and safe neighborhoods are of major concern to impoverished racial minorities who do not have the luxury of being “bothered” by things such as pressure from society to uphold an ideal body image.

Finally, a Nike television commercial ran in 2000 during the women’s NCAA tournament. It featured regular female athletes in a variety of sports—

swimmers, rugby players, body builders, yoga practitioners, boxers, joggers, and hockey players. Each competes intensely throughout the ad.

The swimmer states, "I don't have a uniform, I have a body."

The rugby player admits, "I knit."

A woman flexing her muscles states, "I failed P.E."

The woman practicing yoga acknowledges, "I've never owned a ball."

The boxer states, "I wear dresses."

A hockey player skates through pink balloons and reveals, "I like pink."

The ad ends with a voice-over stating, "I'm a runner, I wear muscles, I have a body, I am a fencer, I am a swimmer, I am a goalie, I am a yogini, I am a rugby player, I am a competitor, I sweat." This is a very poignant example of the blurring of gender roles. The message is that it is *okay* to have both masculine and feminine traits and that these need not be mutually exclusive. Through participation in sport, violence, aggression, physical pain, and exertion are now absorbed into the female identity. Yet women do not have to give up their feminine appearance or qualities to be fierce competitors. And femininity need not neutralize their athletic prowess. Engaging in traditional feminine stereotypes is beneficial if it is for one's own pleasure. Sport makes women comfortable with their bodies, and women can do with their bodies as they see fit.

This ad was shown during an event that attracts a considerable male and female audience, and the message is likely to appeal to a mixed audience. Though the black athletes are overrepresented in the aggressive, violent types of sport and those that require strength (such as boxing, bodybuilding, and rugby), they, like the white athletes, are reclaiming their femininity according to their own standards. This is different from the sexualization of female athletes that is used to maintain patriarchal arrangements and serve the interests of male-dominated structures. These athletes appear to be in true possession of their own bodies. It is a clear example of women proactively assuming an identity as athletes, with sex appeal viewed as coincidental, as it is for males. This ad perhaps best expresses how women can take advantage of sport for their own personal benefit. Additionally, the recognition of masculinity as a social construct may help to break down the gender divide.

CONCLUSION

Increased sports participation as established through Title IX has helped to introduce a new notion of femininity and in some important ways has advanced

the cause of feminism. It has allowed many females to enjoy the financial and social rewards attached to athleticism, which has historically been available to men only. Women's participation in contact sports has helped to deconstruct the conception of masculinity and the ideology of gender difference.

Some of the ads and media coverage discussed in this manuscript do reflect the advantages that Title IX brought about. They portray strong, capable, achievement-oriented athletes who feel good about themselves and act independently. The message is that it is now acceptable for women to be strong, toned, trained, competitive, and athletic. Gender differences are revealed as both insignificant and as constructed. Females are reclaiming their bodies through sport and defining themselves on their own terms, breaking down the negative pretense of sport, and transcending the constraints of patriarchy. Off the field, a number of athletes have pursued various means to supplement their income and visibility, in some cases using nudity or sex appeal. From a post-feminist perspective, this is perceived as liberating and empowering.

However, the potential pitfalls to some of the textual portrayals of female athletes need to be acknowledged. Although the popularity and visibility of women in sports is a positive thing, the mechanisms through which this is achieved can be controversial. As the socialist feminist perspective correctly points out, profit is an important driving force of the patriarchal system. Marketers (as well as those who own and control sports teams and the media) undeniably contrive appealing images of spokespersons for their products. Often, they construe polyvalent and ambivalent messages that are open to multiple readings. These combine notions of feminism and traditional stereotypes of femininity. In some ways, blacks may enjoy a greater expansion of gender roles and trespass more freely across the boundaries of traditional standards of femininity, because they have never been fully included in the stringent ideals of femininity and heterosexuality to begin with.

Radical feminists challenge postfeminists on the relationship between structure and agency. They argue that even when women participate willingly in the process of the sexualization and commodification of their bodies, this complicity reinforces the system of male domination through the exploitation of their bodies. The material benefits that women gain, therefore, are within the confines of the patriarchal structures that organize and control society. From a radical feminist perspective, sexism, like racism, homophobia, or classism, works at a societal level and must be combated at that level. The central goal of radical feminism is therefore cultural transformation. Although athletes who use nudity may gain financially and take pride in their individual success, they are not necessarily acting on behalf of other women to enhance the collective position of women in society.

The central question is who controls choices that women make and for what ends. When sex appeal, as defined by toned bodies, is refigured as a type of sexuality and when athletes comply with these efforts to feminize their bodies, it leaves the institutions in place that ultimately control and reinforce representations of feminized athletes. Regardless of society's obsession with the female body and the sexualization of women through male-dominated institutions of sport and media, women actively participate in how they are projected and what they want to be rewarded for through their individual choices. What is essential is that women take advantage of the benefits sports participation offers and use this access in a constructive way to further diminish discrimination and unequal treatment on the basis of gender.

NOTES

1. Mariah Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 2.
2. Wilson Sporting Goods Company and the Women's Sports Foundation, *The Wilson Report: Men, Dads, Daughters and Sports* (East Meadow, NY: Women's Sports Foundation, 1988).
3. Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sports* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
4. Nancy Theberge, "The Construction of Gender in Sport: Women, Coaching and the Naturalization of Difference," *Social Problems* 40, no. 3 (1993): 301–313.
5. Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon Smith, "Commodity Fetishism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1991): 349.
6. *Ibid.*, 341.
7. Margaret Andersen, *Thinking about Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender*, 6th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003).
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 406.
10. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "The U.S. Team Keeping Dreams Alive," sec. B5, February 6, 2000.
11. Ann Gerhart, "Cashing In on the World Cups," *Washington Post*, sec. C10–11, July 4, 1999.
12. *Ibid.*
13. WNBA, "WNBA and Players Association Sign Labor Agreement," http://www.wnba.com/news/labor_agreement_030425.html (accessed August 1, 2003).
14. Michael McCarthy, "Advertisers Shift Focus to Female Athletes," *USA Today*, December 12, 2000.
15. Darren Rovell, "Are Venus and Serena Bad for Tennis?" *ESPN Sports Business*,

<http://www.espn.go.com/sportsbusiness/s/2003/0202/1503084.html> (accessed August 1, 2003).

16. McCarthy, "Advertisers Shift Focus."
17. Goldman, Heath, and Smith, "Commodity Fetishism," 349.
18. See Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, rev. ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1988).
19. See Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (New York: Morrow, 1991).
20. Holly Bruback, "The Athletic Aesthetic," *New York Times Magazine*, June 23, 1996.
21. Robert Sullivan, "Goodbye to Heroin Chic: Now It's Sexy to be Strong," *Time*, July 19, 1999, 62.
22. Goldman, Heath, and Smith, "Commodity Fetishism," 349.
23. Bruback, "Athletic Aesthetic," 119.
24. Maureen Dowd, "Nymphet at the Net," *New York Times*, June 4, 2000, 24.
25. Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get*, 215.
26. Ruth Ferla, "Bringing Home Lots of More Gold," *New York Times*, January 27, 2002.
27. Ibid.
28. Goldman, Heath, and Smith, "Commodity Fetishism," 333–351.
29. Anne Russo, "Conflicts and Contradictions among Feminists over Issues of Pornography and Sexual Freedom," *Women's Studies International Forum* 10 (1987): 103–11.
30. Anne du Cille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 3 (1994): 591–629.
31. Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get*, 206.
32. Sohaila Shakib and Michele Dunbar, "The Social Construction of Female and Male High School Basketball Participation," *Sociology Perspectives* 45, no. 4 (2002): 353–371.
33. Ibid.
34. Mary Kane, "Resistance/Transformation of the Oppositional Binary: Exposing Sport as a Continuum," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 19 (1995): 191–218.
35. Jane Ollenberger and Helen Moore, *A Sociology of Women: Intersection of Patriarchy, Capitalism, and Colonization* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1998).
36. See Bruback, "Athletic Aesthetic," and Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, for a thorough historical account of the evolution of stereotypes about female athletes in the first half of the twentieth century.
37. Elizabeth Etue and Megan K. Williams, *On the Edge: Women Making Hockey History* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1996).

38. Ibid.
39. Shakib and Dunbar, "Social Construction," 34.
40. Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get*, 215.
41. Michael Messner and Faye Wachs, "The Gender of Audience Building: Televised Coverage of Women's and Men's NCAA Basketball," *Sociological Inquiry* 66, no. 4 (1996): 422–439.
42. Ibid., 431.
43. Delia Douglas, "To Be Young, Gifted, Black and Female," *Sociology of Sport Online* 5, no. 2 (2002), <http://physed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v5i2/v5i2.html> (accessed August 4, 2003).
44. Ibid.
45. Kevin B. Wamsley, "The Public Importance of Men and the Importance of Public Men: Sport and Masculinities in 19th Century Canada," in *Sport and Gender in Canada*, ed. Paul White and Kevin Young (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24–39.