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Abstract

Within the arena of sport, there is a common belief that female athletes are inferior and incapable athletes. The media plays a role in reinforcing this stereotype. This study examines the article patterns of female athletes in Time magazine from 2007 to 2009. The study will inspect the length and content of articles in every issue distributed in this time frame to see if these athletes are given appropriate exposure. If past research indicates future findings, the sample will show that female athletes are seen less for their athletic accomplishments and more for their off-the-field endeavors. Furthermore, the athletes that play aesthetically pleasing sports will have their off-the-field endeavors discussed more so than their on-the-field accomplishments. This research is vital to understanding the lack of media attention given to female athletes as well as the stereotype that exists for these individuals.

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Abstract

Within the arena of sport, there is a common belief that female athletes are inferior and incapable athletes. The media plays a role in reinforcing this stereotype. This study examines the article patterns of female athletes in *Time* magazine from 2007 to 2009. The study will inspect the length and content of articles in every issue distributed in this time frame to see if these athletes are given appropriate exposure. If past research indicates future findings, the sample will show that female athletes are seen less for their athletic accomplishments and more for their off-the-field endeavors. Furthermore, the athletes that play aesthetically pleasing sports will have their off-the-field endeavors discussed more so than their on-the-field accomplishments. This research is vital to understanding the lack of media attention given to female athletes as well as the stereotype that exists for these individuals.

Female Athletes in the Media

Females have been a group traditionally forbidden from the sport experience. The main reason for this is that sport has persistently been viewed as gender-specific. As a result, very few females have had involvement in athletics. In 1972, however, legislation was passed of extreme significance. Title IX was implemented, prohibiting discrimination by gender in all federally funded programs including athletics (Simon, 1993). As a result 2,000,000 girls were participating in high school sports by 1979. The passage marked the beginning of modern sport, as women now partook in sports generally known to be played by men.

Despite the improvement in treatment of female athletes over the years, there are many examples of discrimination against these athletes today. A major issue that exists is the amount and type of media coverage given to female athletes. The media is a powerful force that shapes public opinions and values in modern culture. Bryant and Jennings (2006) assert that mass media portrays the dominant images or symbolic representations of American society. It sometimes allows for viewers or readers to perceive males and females differently. When the media's production of female athletes is unfair and inaccurate, citizens see them as inferior and incapable individuals. Title IX has done little to eliminate the stereotypes surrounding these athletes because females are still not given the quantity and quality of media coverage that males receive. It is important that society recognizes the marginalization that exists for these athletes. The issue of gender in sport has long been essential to people's perceptions of sport in society. Mass media's representation of sport is no different, and

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women have consequently been degraded in the sport arena. The coverage of women's sports is inferior to male sports as far as quantity and type of coverage.

Literature Review

Carty (2005) looks at two different perspectives to describe portrayals of female athletes. The first is the radical feminist perspective, which says that the "willingness of females to display their bodies and emphasize feminine traits takes away from their athletic achievement and reinforces the system of male domination" (p. 134). Although these athletes may gain financially and take pride in their individual success, those who choose to pose nude or seductively in the media are not necessarily acting on behalf of other women to improve their position in society.

On the contrary, the post-feminist perspective states that female athletes who use sex appeal in the media is liberating and empowering to them. The women's own "decision to display their bodies demonstrates that they are in fact control of how the images are projected" (Carty, 2005, p. 152)

For a radical feminist, it is sufficient to say that female athletes of this perspective have the power of choice and control regarding whether they decide to display their bodies in the media. Scraton and Flintoff (2002) assert that "the very existence of skilled and strong women athletes demanding recognition and equal access to resources is a destabilizing tendency in the current gender order" (p. 20). Women did not always have this opportunity, however.

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The media plays an important role in reinforcing gender roles. Knight and Giuliano (2003) state that women are traditionally seen as passive, dependent, and family-oriented individuals. On the other hand men are viewed as powerful, dominating, and independent (p. 272). For a male, being an athlete is consistent with the traditional male role. When females are active and play sports, it contradicts the conventional female role (Knight & Giuliano, 2003).

The type of sport has to be taken into account when looking at perceptions of female athletes. Eastman and Billings (2005) say that while participating in athletics, the media chooses to harness its attention on aspects of a woman's "femaleness" such as beauty or attractiveness rather than athletic knowledge or skill. Tennis and figure skating, for example, are commonly referred to as "sex-appropriate" sports because they are graceful and pleasing to the eye. Boyle and Haynes (2000) provide an example of a writer in *The Times* stereotyping Mary Pierce after the 1999 French Open. Simon Barnes makes it sound as if Pierce's large muscles are a negative.

"Phwoar, look at those muscles! Suddenly, bursting out of her skimpy tennis tops, we have a pair of arms like Boris Becker's thighs. It is like the Incredible Hulk in drag and slow motion" (Boyle & Haynes, 2000, para. 4).

This quote exemplifies the type of stereotype that plagues the media. Rather than praising Pierce for being fit, the author is disapproving of her body shape. "The sport of tennis is a sport where "lady-like" temperament of women players is central to media narratives" (Boyle, 2000, para 6). Grace and finesse are unfortunately deemed better than being powerful. Eastman and Billings (2005) had similar findings when studying the 1999 U.S. Open. They found that female players' physical attractiveness was mentioned three times as

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frequently as male players' physical characteristics. This type of commentary furthers the gender representation of female athletes.

Scraton and Flintoff (2002) argue that sport media denies power to female athletes. Because power is withheld from women and accorded to men, "sport provides us with a model for the exercise of power in our society" (p. 86). Women as a demographic are distributed into "female-appropriate" individual sports, while males are categorized into both team sports and "manly" sports. These qualities reinforce females' supposed traditional role in society.

Another way to look at gender discrimination in sports is to examine individual versus team sports. As Scraton and Flintoff (2002) put it, female athletes are given "denial of team." In other words, women receive social acceptance for individual sports more than team contests. "Individual non-contact sports further the segregation of the athletes from their teammates and confirm the athlete's femininity" (p. 85). It is more socially acceptable to participate in sports such as golf, swimming, and gymnastics because women are allowed to remain true to the female stereotype of being glamorous, graceful, and non-sweaty.

Scraton and Flintoff (2002) examined broadcast commentary of the 1986 NCAA Division I women's and men's basketball championship games on television. For the women's game, play-by-play commentary clearly lacked focus on the team and focused solely on individual athletes. For example, individuals were bringing the ball down the court, setting up plays, scoring the points, fouling, and losing the ball out-of-bounds. Specific examples include, "Beverly Harris starts Texas out and ties it up at 2," "Cynthia Cooper brings it down," and "the foul sends Cooper to the line" (p. 87). The school name was rarely mentioned. For the men's

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game, however, the team was emphasized. For instance, “they have shown great interior motion,” “rebound by Duke,” and “last touched by Duke” (p. 88). Using a female athlete’s name as opposed to her team implies inferiority because the commentator’s subconsciously may believe that these women are not worthy of representing their own sports team. To be part of a prominent college basketball team is an honor and is something men and women work for their entire lives. Commentators may find it difficult to imagine women representing a basketball team because it mandates hard work and determination. The announcers might refer to females as individuals in this case because they are downplaying the notion that they can uphold the values and perseverance necessary in order to be part of a highly-touted basketball team. The fact that this is their belief contributes to the existing stereotype that females are inferior and incapable athletes.

In addition to denial of team, Scraton and Flintoff (2002) also examined “denial of game.” This means that the physical skills of the basketball players were virtually ignored during the championship telecast. Rather, commentary focused on their movement. Phrases and terms were stated such as “so fun to watch,” “very pretty,” and “nice” (p. 88). Males were talked about with regards to their athletic skill. For example, “powerful,” “pure” and “great” were used. The quantity of media coverage of female athletes is inferior. *Sports Illustrated* is a magazine in which a major discrepancy occurs between articles focusing on male and female athletics. Lumpkin and Williams performed a study on feature article from the mid-1950s to late 1980s. They found that the magazine allots far fewer column inches and photographs per article for women’s sports as compared to men’s (as cited in Knight and Giuliano, 2001). The magazine even disseminates a monthly swimsuit issue to appeal to the male fan base. Davis

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(1997) argues that “the cultural significance of the swimsuit issue derives from the fact that it contributes to a larger project that celebrates a politically reactionary form of masculinity” (p. 18). Therefore, it is not surprising that the regular issues of *Sports Illustrated* are underpinned by the same logic and give men’s sports the majority of the coverage (as cited in Bryant & Raney, 2006).

Print media is guilty of portraying female athletes as sex symbols. A good example of this took place in the 1999 World Cup championship game. According to Carty (2005), after scoring the final goal in dramatic fashion Brandi Chastain knelt to the ground, raised her arms in triumph, and ripped off her shirt. The photo of her with just a sport bra was dispensed throughout magazines and newspapers. This portrayal drew as much attention as the actual achievement- scoring the goal. Chastain became well known as a result of leading her country to victory. Soon after, she volunteered to pose nude for *Gear* magazine. She claims doing it to show off her body she “earned through intense physical training” and not to “objectify her body” (p. 138) Nonetheless, her decision to pose nude perpetuates the stereotype that women are viewed as sex symbols rather than athletes.

Even when media portrays female athletes, the content tends to be negative. Sports have an overwhelmingly male audience, female athletes displaying eroticism are highly marketable. Carty (2005) states that “corporate interests have a hand in promoting certain gender representations” (p. 139). Female athletes are thus rewarded financially for displaying exhibiting sensual characteristics in the media. Davis (1997) states that in 1989, companies paid about 28 percent more to advertise in the swimsuit edition of *Sports Illustrated* than in any

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other issue that year. Data found that in 1994, rates for full page color advertisements cost about eight percent more for the swimsuit edition than in the regular issue. To attract sponsors, female athletes are expected to not only present an image of vitality and physical attractiveness but also of feminine beauty and obedience to traditionally feminine standards of living (Carty, 2005).

The quantity and quality of media coverage given to female athletes is inferior to male athletes. When females are given this type of coverage, it creates the stereotype that they are not good athletes. Television and magazines are two prime advertising vehicles in which females are vastly underrepresented. The purpose of this study is to see if a popular United States magazine is part of the issue regarding the stereotype that current exists in the sports world. This research attempts to address the following questions:

1. Are *Time* articles focusing on the female athlete's physical characteristics or off-the-field endeavors rather than athletic accomplishments?
2. Does the type of sport the article subject plays affect the amount of coverage given to the female athlete?

Method

This study represents an effort to better understand magazine coverage of women's sports. Content analysis was performed for every *Time* magazine issue from 2007 to 2009. Research was conducted to determine the quantity of feature articles for female athletes and the type of content presented in those articles. I chose *Time* because it is currently the 13th most circulated magazine in the United States (Top 100, 2001). The amount of articles found

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will assist me in determining whether the magazine is focusing on the athlete's performance on or off the field. For example, are the articles focusing on the female athlete's physical characteristics rather than athletic accomplishments? It will also help me determine if the gender stereotype against female athletes stated previously is accurate. It is a longitudinal research design because I am measuring three or so variables over a three-year time frame. Using three years' worth of issues is a good sample size to determine because it provides a sufficient amount of articles to prove the hypothesis accurate.

The type of sport the subject plays will also be taken into account. For instance, a figure skater like Sasha Cohen or Michelle Kwan (see Appendix A) is more likely to be asked off-the-field questions than a basketball or rugby player. This is because the sport of figure skating is aesthetically pleasing and requires grace and finesse, thus deeming it "sex-appropriate."

Appendix A depicts my research. The table is categorized by the date, subject, type of article, amount dedicated to "off-the-field" topics, as well as whether the sport the subject plays is "sex-appropriate" or not. When examining article content, I went through each article and counted the number of paragraphs dedicated to on-the-field accomplishments in relation to off-the-field endeavors. If the number of "off-the-field" paragraphs was 40 percent or more, I put a checkmark next to that article. I then used those checkmarks to determine whether the majority of the athletes in these articles played "sex-appropriate" sports. If so, I put two checkmarks. This research method will aid in my determination of

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whether *Time* magazine is perpetuating the stereotype that female athletes are given inferior coverage to that of male athletes.

Results

Research Question 1

Are Time articles focusing on the female athlete's physical characteristics or off-the-field endeavors rather than athletic accomplishments?

The results shown in Appendix A indicate that of the 32 articles and interviews found from 2007 to 2009, 17 of those pieces dedicated at least 40 percent or more to the female's off-the-field endeavors. Thus, my hypothesis is accurate.

Research Question 2

Does the type of sport the article subject plays affect the amount of coverage given to the female athlete?

In a word, yes. Out of the 17 articles dedicated to off-the-field endeavors, 11 of the subjects in those articles participated in "sex-appropriate" sports. The "sex-appropriate" sports in Appendix A comprise tennis, figure skating, and swimming. This supports my hypothesis- that those who played these types of sports would be asked about off-the-field endeavors more so than on-the-field successes.

Discussion

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Overall, I feel this study was valuable for a couple of reasons. First, the authors of *Time* magazine offer a broader perspective of the world of sports. If I were to perform a study using *Sports Illustrated*, for instance, things might be different. *Sports Illustrated* is known for focusing some of its efforts on female athletes' off-the-field endeavors. The magazine comes out with a swimsuit edition every month in which these athletes pose in swimsuits. It is likely that these authors have degrading thoughts regarding the abilities of female athletes and consequently have a biased perspective. *Time* rarely discusses athletics, so I felt this wider perspective was beneficial to this study.

Limitations

As with all research, there are limitations to acknowledge. Three years' worth of *Time* magazine was used for this study. Some might say that the fact that I only found 32 total articles pertaining to female athletes during that time frame is too small a sample to use. Using *Time* magazine as a source may limit this study because the authors of the magazine are seemingly not sports experts. For example, an author might not be well-versed enough in sports to be able to properly ask a female athlete questions relating to on-the-field successes. More research is needed to gain greater knowledge of media coverage of women's sports.

Future Research

Future Research could include comparisons among multiple magazines and investigations of both male and female athletes. Studies could compare the amount and type of coverage given to female athletes in one magazine when compared to another magazine. In addition, male and female athletes could be compared within the same magazine. Are articles and interviews about male athletes dedicating more content to on-the-field achievements than

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they are to female athletes? Furthermore, research could be conducted using photographs rather than article content. Are photographs of female athletes derogatory in any sense? Are the pictures exemplifying them as sex symbols as opposed to athletes? Continued research is critical to answer these and other important questions associated with media coverage of women's sports.

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Appendix A

Article Recording Chart

Date	Subject	Type of Article	40% + → off-the-field	Sex-Appropriate?
1/7/07	Sasha Cohen	Interview	No	Yes
2/25/07	Sarah Hughes/Michelle Kwan	Feature piece	Yes	Yes
4/22/07	Justine Henin	Feature piece	Yes	Yes
5/13/07	Michelle Wie	Interview	Yes	No
6/24/07	Anna Kournikova	Interview	Yes	Yes
7/22/07	Heather Mitts	Interview	No	No
8/5/07	Jennie Finch	Article	Yes	No
9/2/07	Swin Cash	Article	No	No
10/14/07	Gretchen Bleiler	Article	No	No
11/18/07	Ashley Force	Article	Yes	No
12/16/07	Amanda Beard	Feature piece	Yes	Yes
1/6/08	Dara Torres	Article	Yes	Yes
2/17/08	Ana Ivanovic	Article	No	Yes
3/23/08	Danica Patrick	Interview	Yes	No
4/6/08	Lauren Jackson	Interview	No	No
5/11/08	Mao Asada	Article	No	Yes
6/15/08	Missy Gibson	Article		Yes
7/13/08	Alicia Sacramone	Interview	No	Yes
8/3/08	Venus Williams	Interview	Yes	Yes
9/7/08	Abby Wambach	Article	No	No
10/12/08	Yelena Isinbayeva	Article	No	Yes
1/4/09	Kim Clijsters	Interview	Yes	Yes
2/8/09	Candace Parker	Interview	Yes	No
3/1/09	Maya Moore	Article	No	No
4/12/09	Natalie Gulbis	Article	Yes	Yes
5/17/09	Misty May	Feature Piece	Yes	Yes
6/7/09	Maria Sharapova	Interview	Yes	Yes

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7/19/09	Svetlana Kuznetsova	Article	No	Yes
8/9/09	Lindsey Vonn	Article	Yes	No
9/13/09	Serena Williams	Feature Piece	Yes	Yes
10/25/09	Vera Zvonereva	Interview	No	yes
11/15/09	Lorena Ochoa	Article	No	No