

**From Sports Bras to Ponytails:
Media Sexualizes Female Athletes in Post-Title IX Era**

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Before the passing of Title IX in 1972, there were limited opportunities for women to play sports, especially in college athletics. Title IX and the global women's rights movement helped women gain equality in athletics and other areas such as business and medicine. As athletic opportunities increased for women, there was a subsequent increase in media coverage. Studies conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s found that women were commonly depicted as mentally and physically inferior to male athletes whether it was via subtle or obvious comparisons. Since 1972, have media representations of female athletes improved as popularity for female sports has grown?

The US women's national soccer team was formed in 1985, but it wasn't until the 1999 Women's World Cup tournament that media attention skyrocketed. Helene A. Shugart, a communications professor at the University of Utah, analyzed major newspapers, magazines, and TV coverage of this tournament to research how these forms of media were portraying female athletes like superstar Mia Hamm. Shugart found that the media stereotyped these athletes in typical gender constructions including sexualizing them in a variety of ways (Shugart, 2003, p.4). For example, Hamm was commonly featured in more passive poses for photographs such as face only shots, which made it easier for consumers to associate this athlete as an attractive and sexual being rather than the best forward in international competition (Shugart, 2003, p.8). Additionally, journalists tended to write more about the soccer players' physical appearances than their athletic skills even though they all wore loose fitting jerseys during games. Many articles published during and after the tournament referred to the players' ponytails to subtly remind readers of their gender by bringing attention of their need to pull up their long hair away from their faces, which sexualizes these athletes. Articles in *Time* and *People Weekly* described Hamm as a "glamour girl" rather than a

soccer player undermining her athletic prowess (Shugart, 2003, p.8). Even in very brief articles in *The Washington Post* and *The Atlanta Constitution*, Mia Hamm and Brandi Chastain were introduced to the readers as married women (Shugart, 2003, p.16). Most coverage emphasized the athlete's relationships of daughter, sister, mother, and/or wife over their athletic accomplishments, which makes the players seem heavily dependent on their male support system and tells young girls that they are sisters, wives, or mothers first and athletes second.

Shugart's content analysis showed that this sexualization of female athletes did not occur just a few times in one or two publications made for male consumers. Instead, publications ranging from *People* to *Time* to *Sports Illustrated* and television programming on ESPN, ABC, and CBS focused on their ponytails, nail polish, and their curves, which tells young girl athletes that their physical appearance is more important than their play on the soccer field (Shugart, 2003, p.8). For example, Brandi Chastain removed her jersey top in celebration after scoring the winning penalty kick in the championship game. The media focused on that moment rather than the team's World Cup victory even though male athletes have been doing the same celebratory act for years (Shugart, 2003, p. 12). Articles in the *Boston Herald* and *San Francisco Herald* discussed the consequences of Chastain's act without even mentioning that she was celebrating scoring the game-winning goal in a shootout for the world championship game. Other articles in *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Denver Post*, *Business Week*, *US News & World Report*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Time* all commented on Chastain's "striptease" or described how she "stripped" off her jersey, which undermines her team's achievement out on the field (Shugart, 2003, p. 12). By having such established

newspapers sexualize these soccer players in such a manner prevents men and even women from taking them seriously as professional athletes.

Ronald Bishop, a communications professor at Drexel University, quickly learned that newspapers weren't the only form of media trivializing female athletics. He analyzed 569 articles and accompanying photographs found in *Sports Illustrated's* feature articles from 1980 to 1996. While the popularity of female athletics did increase over that time period due in part to Title IX, media coverage still tended to focus on the athlete's clothes, appearance, and other feminine characteristics rather than her athletic performances. Bishop found that the number of women featured in photographs accompanying feature articles significantly decreased from 12.1% in 1980 to 4.4% in 1996 (Bishop, 2003, p. 190). As Shugart learned in her study, Bishop noticed that while there was a small percentage of joint photographs (photos containing both men and women) each year, a majority of them had women cast in a secondary role. For instance in 1994, 62.5% of the joint photos featured the male athlete and his significant other, mother, or daughter (Bishop, 2003, p. 191). While female sports may be gaining popularity, *Sports Illustrated* has yet to reflect this in its magazine and that "the definition of athlete, at least the one written on the pages of SI, does not yet include women" (Bishop, 2003, p. 192). By printing photos primarily of male athletes, *Sports Illustrated* is essentially sending the message to female athletes that their achievements are inferior and thus only reinforces male hegemony in sports.

Jo Ann Buysse and Melissa Embser-Herbert, professors at University of Minnesota and Hamline University respectively, found similar results when they performed a longitudinal analysis of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I media guides in 1989-1990 and then in 1996-1997, specifically looking at the

cover photograph for each media guide (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 69). The researchers looked at media guides from typically female, male, and gender-neutral sports to ensure an appropriate sample for analysis. They found that men were significantly more likely to be portrayed on the playing surface than their female counterparts, which agrees with Shugart's findings of passive images of the soccer players in magazines and papers (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 71). In 1989-1990, female athletes were featured less in their uniforms than the male athletes. However by 1996-1997, there was no significant difference between the two genders showing an improvement in that aspect contrary to Shugart's and Bishop's findings. Unfortunately, these positive changes were not seen in other areas as women were less likely to be shown in action shots while men's likelihood actually increased (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 71). While female and male athletes were less likely to be portrayed as feminine and masculine respectively in 1997 than 1990, "women were more likely to be portrayed as feminine than men were to be portrayed as masculine" showing that disparities still exist between genders (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 73). For the most part, their study's results were consistent with other recent findings that the media still sexualizes female athletes despite an increase in popularity of female sport.

A sport management professor at Bowling Green State University, Paul Pedersen, examined 829 photographs of randomly selected newspaper issues from the 43 daily papers in Florida over a span of one year. Similar to Bishop's findings in *Sports Illustrated*, Pedersen discovered that male high school athletics garnered much more photographic coverage than female high school athletics including more photographic column inches. Two thirds of the high school sport photographs were of the male teams

with a greater percentage of those photos in color than their female counterparts (Pedersen 308). Unlike Buysse and Embser-Herbert's study of NCAA media guides, Pedersen found both male and female athletic photographs were equally likely to have action shots or still shots (Pedersen 313). Pedersen did come to a similar conclusion as Bishop's *Sports Illustrated* content analysis. Both concluded that female athletes were greatly under-represented with their male counterparts receiving a majority of the coverage with better photos in terms of content, position, and color (Pedersen 303). The lack of equal coverage tells readers that the newspaper editors view female high school athletics as less important than their male equivalent and essentially trivialize female participation in high school sports. It is the gatekeepers in the media such as newspaper editors and advertising executives who make the decisions that can have a noticeable impact on the youth of America and their view toward female athletics.

Marie Hardin conducted a study to determine what influences sport editors when they act as gatekeepers for paper content. She surveyed 285 daily newspapers in the southeast US region. Over 95% of these editors were white males (Hardin, 2005, p. 68). Only 55% of the editors had a formal method to evaluate readers' interests (Hardin, 2005, p. 69). That statistic shows that many of these editors relied on their own opinions of what consumers want to read. Since one fourth of the editors believed women were naturally less athletic and one third thought women were less interested in sports, this study helps to explain the lack of equal coverage in male and female athletics (Hardin, 2005, p. 73). Hardin's analysis does not address female athletes purposefully posing in passively for advertisements or articles.

Victoria Carty wanted to examine the motives behind some of the female athletes agreeing to pose for magazines as well as look into advertisements featuring women in

sport. She conducted a content analysis of both television commercials and print advertisements found during the 1996 Summer Olympics (women's soccer only), 1999 Women's World Cup, 2000 NCAA women's basketball tournament, and the regular season WNBA games in 2001 and 2002 (Carty, 2005, p. 134). An increase in popularity of female sports has allowed stars like Mia Hamm, Sheryl Swoops, Serena and Venus Williams to receive endorsements valued at one million dollars and higher from corporations like Nike, Gatorade, and Reebok thus increasing the number of advertisements featuring female athletes. In order to achieve these big endorsements, female athletes must show their feminine side consequently proving their marketability. Unlike the other content analyses, Carty notes that some female athletes choose to pose nude or in very sexual poses to show off their bodies they worked so hard to build (Carty, 2005, p. 138). Essentially, these athletes are encouraging the mass media to continue sexualizing female athletes by their own doing. Carty agrees with other researchers in that these athletes are shown in photographs with passive poses, but argues that many of these athletes believe they are showing off their muscles rather than allowing themselves to be objectified.

To ensure the public knows that the female athletes are heterosexual, Carty noted female athletes were commonly shown with males in photographs. For example when Julie Foudy, team captain of the World Cup team, posed in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, her husband was running alongside her and the photograph even showed her "holding onto his arm" (Carty, 2005, p. 143). The presence of her husband in the photo detracts from her success as a female athlete. Carty wonders if by female athletes choosing to pose in these suggestive ways, these actions will push back the

"liberal feminist agenda" because they are getting media coverage for their sex appeal rather than their athletic skills (Carty, 2005, p. 140).

What could be potentially harmful to young girls are ads showing young female athletes in passive poses. A Nike television ad had some girls playing soccer and softball and then it would switch those images up to girls hugging a stuffed animal, playing dress up, or putting on lipstick (Carty, 2005, p. 149). Yet commercials featuring young boy athletes focus only on their play on the field or other physical activities. While these advertisements have been an improvement as they did feature females playing sports, femininity is heavily emphasized and thus takes away from any positive gain shown in the commercial.

All researchers agreed that the popularity and participation of female athletics has significantly increased since the implementation of Title IX in 1972. They also all agreed that the media coverage does not accurately reflect or mirror the growing popularity of female athletics. "Estimates put women's competitive sports at about 40% of all sports in the United States, although they garner only about 7% of the coverage" (Hardin, 2005, p. 64). Many of the researchers believed that the media still feminizes female sport participants, but in more subtle ways than it did back in the 1970s. It seems that the media realized that overt sexualization of female athletes would have been very noticeable and offensive to fans of these athletes so the media turned to more sophisticated means to disguise their intentions. Based on the current literature, it seems researchers would like to see greater equal coverage of male and female athletics in both print and television without sexualizing or constructing gender stereotypes of the women in sport. The mass media has progressed quite a bit since 1972 in terms of

coverage, but it still has room for a lot of improvement when it comes to female athletics.

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