A Shifting Gaze?

The Changing Photographic Representation of Women Athletes

by Allyson Bowman and Dayna Daniels

Le contexte et le contenu des images photographiques d'athlètes fém-inins a changé de façon très positive depuis les 35 dernières années. Cependant, le message global qui se dégage des images photographiques et du texte qui les accompagne met encore l'emphase sur la beauté, les rôles sexuels et la sexualité des athlètes féminins au détriment de leurs exploits sportifs.

By hetero-sexualizing women athletes in photographs, male viewers/consumers can enjoy the images without having to identify with women as athletes.

The establishment and maintenance of hegemonic relations-systems that go unquestioned is prevalent throughout sport and sport media coverage (McGregor). This hegemonic relationship is strengthened through the mass media which reinforces the patriarchal concept of sport as a masculine domain and shapes the cultural image of what is acceptable athletic behavior for women. This, in turn, solidifies and perpetuates existing ideological hegemony (Hilliard; McGregor). Although sport is identified with males/maleness, the images of women in sport are consciously not portraying the inherent maleness of the activity. By hetero-sexualizing women athletes in photographs, male viewers/consumers can enjoy the images without having to identify with women as athletes. By having the power to define the image of women and to display women according to this definition, patriarchal relations in sport and society create and control the 'appropriate' female image and determine the activities in which women can participate (Lenskyj).

This article will analyze the changing content of sport photographs of women athletes in pre-Olympic issues of *Sports Illustrated* from 1960-1994. These particular issues were selected for analysis because the Olympic Games provides one context in which the participation of women athletes is more accepted than in other sport settings. The public has come to expect visual media coverage of women athletes in relation to the Olympics more so than for other sporting events and every day coverage. This assumption provided the foundation for content analysis of photographs of women Olympians over the past 35 years. *Sports Illustrated* was selected because of its popularity as a sport media vehicle and its regular attention to Olympic coverage including female athletes and their events.

Is what you see what you get?

There is a tendency to interpret an image in a photograph as real, unchanged and a truthful source of information. Photographs are never neutral. They are the individual photographer's constructed interpretation of a reality upon which many influences are imposed (Duncan). What appears to be a completely objective reproduction of reality is in turn a process of mediated judgments at the discretion of the photographer, editor, or advertiser. The reader/viewer, in turn, observes these interpretations without explanation, and likely, concern for the context of the visual reproduction (Messner).

The visual representations of women athletes tell stories as much as any accompanying text. Because it cannot be known whether or not a magazine consumer reads the articles, it is important that the content of the photographs be as truthful as the written commentary. The content of the pictures can imply certain factors which are not or may not be true, which reinforce cultural stereotypes with respect to femininity, race, compulsory heterosexuality, gender-appropriate, culturally normative activities for women. If the responsibility of the sport photographer/editor is to educate the reader (read: supply truthful information) on what sport is or who an athlete is, then the images chosen must show a complete 'picture' of the woman as athlete. If the visual story being told is exclusively one of wife, mother, or other traditional role; if the action is non-sporting or completely passive; if the image is that of traditional femininity and/or heterosexual appeal, then the photograph is not telling the reader about the woman athlete, but only about 'woman' as she is constructed within society. If a parallel can be drawn regarding the visual representation of male athletes, then further analysis is moot. Casual perusal of *Sports Illustrated* images will quickly determine that males and females are not similarly portrayed.

What is reported/displayed on female athletes is recreated and unchallenged because it is displayed as normal, factual, and encompassing homogeneity among all female athletes. The 'ideal' feminine shape is rooted in patriarchal thought (MacNeill). Images constructing and (re)presenting this ideal through mass media to society, or at the very least the consumers of this product, marginalizes the abilities and achievements of women in all areas of life (Daddario). The socialization into sport of males and females differs dramatically. A male's status as an athlete overrides any other role, such

as husband and father. For females, the status of woman, wife, mother, caregiver, overrides her status as athlete (McGregor). The socialization of women into selective roles legitimates the ideology of patriarchy and reinforces the power to control what is considered 'appropriate' for females by males (and by patriarchal dominance by many other females as well).

The marginalization of woman's role as athlete serves to undermine her athletic ability. A woman athlete is most often defined by her heterosexual attractiveness and the portrayal of accepted presentations of femininity rather than by her athleticism. When a woman/athlete is successful, her accomplishments are often trivialized. She is objectified, sexually, through condescending descriptors and gratuitous photography (Daddario). There is a constant reminder to women that while participating in sport compulsory femininity must be attended to at all times, including, and possibly, especially, during competition.

Sports Illustrated is one of the most widely read sports magazines in North America. It reflects the popularity and status of sport in that culture (Lumpkin and Williams). To a large extent what North American society knows about female and male athletes is created by various media. Because 90.9 per cent of *Sports Illustrated* readers are Caucasian males (Duncan), the imbalance of male athlete coverage, to serve this audience, might be a representative example of how patriarchal assumptions are created and perpetuated within society. The representations used by *Sports Illustrated* of women athletes, particularly visuals, will be selected or created to serve the interests and concerns of its typical reader. Numerous analyses of various *Sports Illustrated* products indicate that the prevailing gender stereotypes found within the broader society are replicated and intentionally reproduced for the male consumer.

In addition to the visual (re)production of female-as-athlete images, the message that these individuals are female first and athletes second is repeatedly emphasized by more attention to issues of femininity, family, sexual orientation, and other non-sport factors than to concerns of athletic excellence. This reinforces the more general social perceptions that sports are male and, therefore, generally inappropriate for female participation. Even as women's involvement and success in high performance sport continues to increase and gain greater acceptance in society, this acceptance is qualified by subtle, hegemonic practice of focusing more on the athlete as female than sportsperson.

Constructing the image

The content of photographs can be analyzed through the body position of the subject, including the tilt of the head or the leaning of the subject's torso toward or away from the camera, the camera angle, special effects or noticeable lighting, the framing or bordering of the subject (Duncan). A number of messages can be conveyed through the content of photographs. In a sports magazine the reader might anticipate the stories being told by the photographs will be of sporting-related factors such as training, competition, victory/defeat. In reality, the body positions of female athletes and the camera angles used often convey images of compulsory-feminine heterosexuality rather than athletic excellence or ability. This serves to highlight the sexual differences between males and females rather than the similarities among all athletes (Duncan; MacNeill).

The context of photographs is another major site of analysis. The context includes the caption, the surrounding written text, the title/subtitle of the article/montage, the placement of the photograph on the page, its size and relation to other photos, and whether it is in black and white or colour (Duncan).

The words—the pictures

The descriptive text found on the contents page of the August 1960 *Sports Illustrated* Olympics Special Issue states that the magazine contains a "16 page photographic portfolio of the *talented and attractive* athletes competing to win" (3) called Speed, Strength and Grace. The format of the photo spread first shows ten pictures of various male athletes in action photos. These are followed by four photographs of female athletes who are shown in passive poses with no indication of their sport participation. The content of the photos implies that the speed and talent mentioned in the text refer to male athletes while the grace, and attractive commentary refers to the female athletes. The placement of the photos of males athletes before the photos of female athletes and the content framed around activity reinforces the importance of sports as male, implies the superiority of males as athletes, and functions to sexualize the female athletes above their athletic excellence.

By 1968 more equitable photographic coverage had come to the pages of the pre-Olympic issue. An action shot of swimmer Debbie Meyer is accompanied by the following text "...an obvious gold medal choice" (*Sports Illustrated* 1968, 51). The photograph is placed in a superior position on the page to that of a photo-action shot of a men's crew. From a feminist analysis of both con-

The written text accompanying the photographs generally highlighted feelings, relationships, and paid employment status over athletic ability.

tent (action shot) and context (superior page placement), this alignment of pictures and the positive captioning might show progress in the equitable treatment of female and male athletes on the pages of *Sports Illustrated.* However, this format was rarely seen in subsequent issues.

The 1972 Preview Olympics issue had increased coverage of both female and male athletes, but many of the photographic representations of the women athletes lost their focus on performance. The full-page photo of gymnast Cathy Rigby smiling down at a group of young girls seated at her feet could be of a play-ground leader or a camp counselor. The text accompanying this photo highlights the small physical stature of the athlete by beginning "Little Cathy Rigby...", (43) an expression that would gain popularity in future captions of many women athletes, while the content of the photo reinforces a juvenile (Cathy is wearing pigtails) and nurturing (relationship to children) image. The impression given to the reader by this combination of written text and photograph does not highlight Rigby's athletic ability. This type of depiction also tends to diminish the sexuality and identification of the athlete as woman by attending to girlish qualities. As girls are rarely seen as a challenge to men, the reduction of women athletes to girls reinforces the patriarchal status of sport as a male domain (Daddario).

In another example from 1972 a photograph of two male athletes running with a group of children is placed above a photo of a female athlete standing alone (46). The upper picture emphasizes the physical activity of both the adult athletes and the all male group of children delighting in their movement. The lower photograph on the same page shows the female athlete in an obviously posed, rather than participatory, position. The pose emphasizing glamour and appeal, as woman not athlete, is the central interpretation of the image. The focus on physical attractiveness once again diminishes concern for athletic importance.

In the Summer Special Olympic Issue of *Sports Illustrated* in 1976, women athletes were portrayed in six of the 28 photographs, four showing the women athletes engaged in sporting activity. Human interest, rather than athletic involvement, was prevalent in many of the photographs of both female and male athletes in this issue. Male athletes were shown posing, playing with children, and drinking beer, although frequently still clothed in athletic apparel. The written text accompanying the photographs of women athletes generally highlighted feelings, relationships, and paid employment status over athletic ability. A photograph of one woman athlete accompanied by her husband and son is captioned "Poland's Irena Szewinska, wife and mother, is no joke as a runner, holding the world records in the 200 and 400 meters" (61). Does this text imply that she is a joke as wife and mother or that it is a joke to real sport for a married woman with children to be an athlete and world record holder? In either case, this careless and insulting wording diminishes women and athletes who are women. It also highlights the perceived incompatibility between a woman's socially constructed roles as wife and mother and her self-proclaimed role as an athlete (Hilliard).

The 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games shifted the focus of sport from a primarily male domain to a very American domain. The hype which accompanied the 1984 Games came from the location of the Summer Games in the United States for the first time since 1932 and the nationalism sparked by the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games. For this Olympiad, *Sports Illustrated* created a 533 page Olympic Preview Issue which both commercialized and commodified Olympic content (MacNeill).

The excitement of the Games was promoted through the excitement of the visual images contained in the 1984 Special Issue of *Sports Illustrated.* Most of the photographs of women athletes show them in competitive action or training. Bulging muscles and strained faces are displayed by women athletes. These are characteristics that are a part of any athletic content involving power and strength, but previously had been ignored or ridiculed on female athletes. A visual browsing through this issue might indicate that women had finally come of age as athletes on the pages of *Sports Illustrated.* A closer scrutiny of the accompanying text and captions shows that the feminine side of these powerful women is being highlighted and protected, thus negating a lot of the advancement falsely portrayed in the visual text.

Some captions that accompanied the powerful images are: "The fawnlike Gallagher becomes a force in the 800 meters..." (*Sports Illustrated* 1984, 44). "The 15-year-old Nagasaki may be from Akita, but she's certainly no dog" (100). "...Tiina Likkak, who brings to her event a balance of strength and beauty" (311). Although it is true that copy writers are looking for words that will attract the readers attention, the words in these captions capture the feminine qualities of the athletes and may neutralize the powerful images they accompany. The word "fawnlike" conjures images of vulnerability, delicateness, and frailty. There is no such impression given from the photograph depicting powerful women sprinters. The reference to Nagasaki as being "no dog" implies that she is heterosexually attractive. Although beauty makes no difference in the successful execution of a javelin throw, positive reference to Lillak's physical appearance is included in the three of the photographs of her.

One continuing exception to images of powerful performances relates to female gymnasts where the opposite representation is typical. Since 1972 world class gymnasts have gotten younger and smaller. Photographs further infantalize these highly skilled performers. Two photographs of Mary Lou Retton, to that date the greatest all-around female gymnast from the United States and its only-ever hope of breaking the Iron Cur-

tain hold on women's gymnastics, showed a 4-year-old Mary Lou in a dancers tutu and a contemporary Mary Lou with a popped bubble gum bubble all over her face. The caption accompanying these photos reads "Retton may be somewhat bigger than at four, but she's still bubbly as a child" (*Sports Illustrated* 1984, 476). Again, the diminutive size of the female athlete is highlighted and child-like behavior is presented. All reference to her athletic excellence and gold-medal probability is absent. The tremendous success and popularity of women's (read: girls) gymnastics is celebrated only because of the ease of identification with little girl activity, an obviously non-threatening opponent to the domain of male sport.

An ironic twist to this representation of female gymnastics is the highly sexualized and artistic representation of rhythmic gymnasts. Rhythmic gymnastics was a new, and not widely known, sport in the 1984 Olympic Games. The stylized, carefully lighted images of the unknown athletes illustrated posed female bodies in which faces are primarily unseen but chests and crotches are centrally placed (*Sports Illustrated* 1984, 220-235). This visual arrangement of female erogenous zones empowers the readers by giving them a form of control over the athlete's body which has been completely sexualized. The voyeuristic reading is enhanced by the article title "A Feast for the Eyes" (*Sports Illustrated* 1984, 220). As most readers would be unfamiliar with rhythmic gymnasts, the choice of photographs and written text might have been selected to draw a male audience to the sport by sexualizing it and the athletes participating in it.

By 1988 *Sport's Illustrated* had settled into a regular pattern of visual and textual representation of women athletes. The majority of photographs showed women athletes in active training or competitive situations. The visual images were exciting and, primarily, paralleled the photographs of male athletes in attention to sporting concerns. The context of the photo spreads was more balanced. But although the visual message had changed, the textual messages maintained the old status-quo. The subtitle of an article on an American archer read "The youngest member of the U.S. team, 14-year-old Denise Parker, will win hearts whether or not she wins a medal" (*Sports Illustrated* 1988, 58). The reference to her youth and heart-winning appeal are saving graces for this young girl—even is she does win an Olympic medal. This downplays her skill and indicates that even if she is a successful athlete, she will always be a successful female. The greatest amount of media attention possibly ever given to a female Olympic athlete went to Florence Griffith Joyner. Representations of this outstanding sprinter were always accompanied, and thus qualified, by the attention played to her physical appearance and outrageous and sexy workout clothing. The first photo of Flo Jo in the 1988 pre-Olympic issue (158), a head shot of the athlete with elaborate makeup and ornate earrings, could be part of an actress's or model's portfolio. The title of the adjoining article is "Very Fancy, Very Fast: U.S. sprinter Florence Griffith Joyner is certainly eye-catching—if, that is, you can catch her" (159). Once again the photo and the text places the physical beauty of the athlete ahead of her athleticism. Even the following full-page shot of Flo-Jo, running in work-out shorts, could be seen by many as very erotic.

Conclusion

Thus sets the trend for *Sports Illustrated* photojournalism. The continuing coverage of women athletes in issues of this publication (when women athlete's are included at all) show powerful, fast, exciting athletes. A non-reading browser of the magazine might contend that the visual representations of women are comparable to those of men. It is now the text that is used to separate female and male athletes, to highlight the feminine and sexual side of the women over their athleticism. To be fair it must be noted that *Sports Illustrated* has a growing amount of "beefcake" images of male athletes. It might be concluded, given the history of this publication of focusing on the femininity and sexuality of female athletes to please male readers, that the sexualizing of male athletes through the visual images chosen is to draw in a great female readership.

The shifting gaze of the *Sports Illustrated* camera has progressed, somewhat, with the times. The greater acceptance of a fit body, with appropriate amounts of 'feminine musculature,' into the continually changing construction of the feminine is reflected in the content and context of the visual images of women athletes.

The written text which accompanies the visual images functions to maintain a status-quo representation of women athletes that has been promoted in *Sports Illustrated* for at least 35 years. Attention to size, age, physical attractiveness, and sexuality is never far from the powerful images they are meant to describe. Even for sports which are considered gender-appropriate, culturally normative activities for women (suggesting adherence to femininity by definition), the images of the athletes are highly sexualized.

Allyson Bowman is an undergraduate, General Studies major at the University of Lethbridge. Her primary areas of study are physical education, sociology, and psychology.

Dayna Daniels is a professor of Physical Education and Coordinator of Women's Studies at the University of Lethbridge. Her research is related to women and physical activity, currently emphasizing the relationships among femininity, sexuality, and women's participation.

References

Daddario, G. "Chilly Scenes of the 1992 Winter Games: The

Mass Media and the Marginalization of Female Athletes." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 11 (1994): 275-288.
Duncan, M. "Sports Photographs and Sexual Differences: Images of Women and Men in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7 (1990): 22-43.
Hilliard, D.C. "Media Images of Male and Female Professional Athletes: An Interpretive Analysis of Magazine Articles." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 1 (1984): 251-262.
Lenskyj, H. *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality.* Toronto: The Women's Press, 1986.
Lumpkin, A. and L.D. Williams. "An Analysis of Sports Illustrated Feature Articles, 1954-1987." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8 (1991): 16-32.
MacNeill, M. "Active Women, Media Representations, and Ideology." *Women, Sport and Culture.* S. Birrell and C. Cole, eds. Champaign, IL.: Human Kinetics, 1994.
McGregor, E. "Mass Media and Sport." *Physical Educator* 46 (1989): 52-55.
Messner, M.A. "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Domain." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988): 197-211.
Sports Illustrated. "Olympics Special Issue." 15 Aug. 1960.
Sports Illustrated. "Mexico 68: The Problem Olympics." 30 Sept. 1968.
Sports Illustrated. "The Olympics." 28 Aug. 1972.
Sports Illustrated. "Speial Olympic Issue." 19 July 1976.
Sports Illustrated. "Special Preview: The 1984 Olympics." 18 July 1984.
Sports Illustrated. "Special Preview Issue: The Summer Olympics Seoul '88." 14 Sept. 1988.