IS IT TIME FOR A VICTORY LAP?
Changes in the Media Coverage of Women in Sport

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Abstract From a feminist perspective sport has been viewed for a long time as a sexist institution, male-dominated and masculine in orientation. And yet, in recent years, women have truly advanced in organized, competitive sport. In this context this article looks at the role of the media in relation to women and sport, reflecting on the literature which has accumulated over the past two decades in this field and considering the notion that more recently a shift in the coverage of women’s sports and female athletes has occurred. Through examining changes that did take place, this article shows that although women have gained some ground as far as media visibility is concerned, especially in major sporting events, it is far too early for a ‘victory lap’. By looking at findings of studies from the late 1990s and examining the media coverage of Marion Jones and Anna Kournikova this article shows that the type of coverage female athletes get has still a long way to go.

Key words • athlete appearance • media • sport • women

Introduction: Women and Sport

The notion that in sport physical and biological differences interface with social and cultural interpretations of gender role expectations has been central to the feminist critique of sport, which emerged in the late 1970s. From this perspective writers have argued that sport is a sexist institution, male-dominated, masculine in orientation and concluded that it naturalizes men’s power and privilege over women (see Sabo and Curry Jansen, 1992). In fact, a number of authors argued that, perhaps more than any other social institution, sport perpetuates male superiority and female inferiority (Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988).

In this context, it should be noted that in her recent — research-based — book The Frailty Myth, Colette Dowling (2000) argues that women are as capable as men of excelling in sports and that in fact there are no biological reasons for women to stay off the sporting field (for a critical report of this book see Krum, 2000; see also Millar, 1999 for a report on the 19th-century ‘extraordinary range of bogus medical arguments against women taking up sport’).

It is important to stress that over the last decades, and particularly during the 1990s, women have made many advances in organized, competitive, high-performance spectator sport. The Olympic Games can serve as a clear example both of the changes in attitudes towards women athletes and of their increased...
numbers in sport. When the modern Olympic Games were revived they were meant to be reserved for men only, as they had been in ancient times. In the first modern Olympics, in 1896, there were no women participants but from the 1900 Games on the number of women participants and the sports they participated in increased steadily — although for many years women’s sports remained marginal. By the Sydney Games in 2000 more women athletes then ever competed in 118 events, including new women’s events such as water polo, and weightlifting. However, they were still left out of sports like boxing and wrestling. It should also be noted that, with all the increase in numbers, women were still but 30 percent of the athletes participating in the Sydney Games.

And yet, overall, figures do suggest a rise in women’s participation in sport, particularly in western societies and most clearly in the US (following Title IX — an amendment to the Civil Rights Act guaranteeing equal funding for girls’ and boys’ sports which became law in 1972). To give but one example in the UK, the number of women’s football teams jumped from 500 in 1993 to 4500 in 2000 (Campbell, 2000), moreover plans are now on course for a Pro-league to be established by 2003.

Women, Media and Sport

Why should the media be discussed in relation to women and sport? The main reason is that the mass media — which are an essential feature of modern social life — preserve, transmit and create important cultural information. Indeed, one central assumption within media studies is that how members of society see themselves, how they are viewed and even treated by others, is determined to a great extent by their media representation (Dyer, 1993).

It can be argued that when it comes to sport the mass media assume an even greater importance since the overwhelming majority of spectators experience sporting events in their mediated version (for further discussion see Creedon, 1994a, 1994b; Kane and Greendorfer, 1994). Indeed, to date a substantial body of work examining the role of the media in relation to women and sport does exist and — very broadly speaking — it tends to focus on two main issues: the amount of coverage and the portrayal of women’s sports and female athletes by the media.¹

Amount of Coverage

During the 1980s and most of the 1990s, research into women, media and sport showed that the media persisted in covering mainly male athletes. Indeed, a consistent — well documented in the literature — finding is the underreporting, and thus underrepresentation, of female athletes and their sporting events throughout all mass media (see discussion in Kane and Greendorfer, 1994; this section however refers primarily to television).

Studies from the early 1990s did not reveal a significant change. In 1994, for example, men were found to receive 93.8 percent of television coverage on US television (see Duncan and Messner, 1998). It is important to emphasize that this
is not an American phenomenon, although many of the studies in this field are conducted in the US, for instance, Duncan and Messner (1998) cite an Australian survey which showed an even lower percentage of coverage of sportswomen.

Since the media are seen as reflecting what is important and has prestige, especially in western society, this severe underrepresentation is seen as creating the impression that women athletes are non-existent in the sporting world or of little value when they do exist. Moreover, this ‘creates a false impression of women’s athleticism by denying the reality of the modern female athlete’ (Kane and Greendorfer, 1994: 35).

This underrepresentation, in turn, is also viewed as creating a vicious circle since the growth of women’s sport is hindered by the lack of funds which nowadays come primarily from sponsorship. Since sponsors are interested in investing in sports and teams which feature regularly on television and women’s sports do not qualify as such, they do not get big cash injections.

**Routine Coverage**

The research findings, even towards the end of the 1990s, on the routine, day-to-day amount of coverage of women in sport, remain that women’s athletes are still, in many cases, ‘symbolically annihilated’ (Tuchman et al., 1978). For instance, a 1998 analysis of the sports coverage in a cross-section of media in the UK resulted in the key findings that 90.2 percent of sports-related programmes on BBC1 covered men’s events, 6.7 percent were devoted to women’s sports and 3.1 percent related to mixed sports; the average duration of women’s sports on BBC1 was significantly shorter than for men’s sports (17 minutes versus 42 minutes); 99.5 percent of sports-related articles in the Sun covered men’s sport events; 88.5 percent of sports-related articles in The Times covered men’s sport events, 10.9 percent were on women’s sports events and 0.6 percent were mixed sports (Mason, 1998).

In a study conducted by Koivula (1999) which examined samples of televisied sports in Sweden during 1995/6 (1470 minutes), with a follow-up examination in 1998 (528 minutes), the findings showed that the percentage of airtime devoted to female athletes in 1995/6 was considerably lower than for male athletes. Furthermore, the corresponding percentage of televised sports news analysed during 1998 is similar to the figures of 1995/6.

Importantly, Koivula (1999) also found that, women athletes received 24.2 and 4.6 percent of the coverage of sports categorized as gender-neutral and masculine, respectively. The corresponding figures for male athletes were 72.5 and 95.1 percent. Only for sports categorized as feminine was the coverage of women athletes (54.8 percent) more extensive than for men (27.0 percent).

This is consistent with former studies which showed that ‘along with significantly less airtime, fewer representations of team or individual “masculine” sports (such as shot putting) are offered photographically through visual images’ (Kane and Greendorfer, 1994: 35; see also Jones et al., 1999; for further recent studies of the amount of coverage in the American context see Duncan and Messner, 1998; for a study of Dutch television see Knoppers and Elling, 2001).
Major Events

However, certain changes in the amount of coverage of women’s sports can certainly be traced, like the extensive and successful coverage of the 1999 Women’s World Cup — in ratings terms — especially in the US, the nation which hosted the games and eventually won the event (see Mackay, 1999; although for the UK see Knightley, 1999). This case in fact showed television organizations that there is profit to be made from women’s sport. Within the Israeli context, the extended coverage of the European success of the Ramat Ha’Sharon Basketball team in the 1999 can also be mentioned. Even more recently, the 2001 UEFA European Women’s Championship attracted a high level of sponsorship, live TV screening of the semi-finals in all four countries concerned and ratings which revealed that every fourth television set in Germany was tuned into the opening game (Germany vs Sweden) (information based on a report in UEFA.com). These could seem like major shifts, and yet the examples mentioned above are of major, international sporting events in which it is safe to assume any successful athlete will get extensive media attention in his or her home country regardless of their sex.

The Olympic Games are a revealing example in this context too. In a study which examined the amount of coverage given to women’s events and female athletes by NBC at the Centennial Olympic Games of 1996, Tuggle and Owen (1999) showed that, ‘On its face, NBC’s coverage of the 1996 Olympics seems balanced, with women receiving almost as much airtime as men’ (p. 178). Importantly, these writers conclude that NBC does deserve some praise for many positive things about their coverage which in essence, according to them, results in the stigma of being a female athlete being slowly erased.

Among other findings (see below) Eastman and Billings (1999) also found that, in the same Games, women’s and men’s events received virtually equal proportions of time and virtually identical numbers of medal events were covered. These findings, according to the researchers, demonstrate that NBC succeeded ‘in equalizing coverage for men’s and women’s sports in two respects: in the number of different events and in the total quantity of minutes devoted to sports of each gender group’ (p. 150).

And yet, in both above mentioned examples of recent research, many ‘buts’ emerge. For instance, Tuggle and Owen (1999) also found — as previous research did — that female competitors were much more likely to receive media attention if they competed in ‘socially acceptable’ individual sports. In fact, as they found, 61 percent of the coverage devoted to women focused only on three sports: swimming, diving and gymnastics, with gymnastics receiving more than one-third (34 percent) of all coverage devoted to female athletes. This was in spite of the fact that, as the researchers note:

The number of fans in the stands and the extensive presence of other media at women’s soccer, basketball, and softball games indicated a high level of interest that was not reflected in the network coverage of those events. (Tuggle and Owen, 1999: 178)

Eastman and Billings (1999) argue that their results can support the conclusion that NBC executives were very concerned at least with the appearance of gender
equity at the 1996 Games and that this concern had a powerful impact on certain aspects of their telecast. They also note that the fact that NBC could directly control the mix and length of coverage and the gender balance in on-air promos within prime time meant that those elements were carefully balanced by gender.

But they do emphasize that,

The habits and preferences of the on-site reporters, probably influenced by their estimates of audience expectations, veered drastically away from balance . . . A network can dictate the philosophy of coverage, but the professional talent within the organization carry it out, and a policy of gender parity does not necessarily alleviate bias in coverage by individual producers, writing teams, or venue reporters, though it may more readily influence studio anchors. Thus, even in 1996, following the pattern of televised sports in general, men athletes and men’s sports continued to receive more salient coverage of all types than women athletes or women’s events. (Eastman and Billings, 1999: 164–5)

Moreover, as they put it, ‘given the media’s treatment of the 1996 Olympics as a pivotal event for women’s sports, the extent to which coverage of women athletes and women’s sports failed to grow [from 1994] is rather astonishing’ (p. 165).

Indeed, as both Tuggle and Owen (1999) and Eastman and Billings (1999) point out, the predominantly male gender of hosts, reporters, and producers might be a primary cause of unknowing or knowing bias. Thus, according to Eastman and Billings, what the NBC high executives wanted and what they actually got may not have been the same.

It is worth noting that, even at the executive level, things may not be as Tuggle and Owen assume. For instance, although the WNBA is covered extensively by NBC, one of this network’s top NBC executives, Alex Gilady, Senior Vice-President of NBC Sports for global operations, told me bluntly (in an interview conducted on 27 November 2000):

David Stern decided that he will make this business grow. So he forced NBC because of the deal with the Men’s [Basketball]. So what? If he stopped it today we would stop it immediately, immediately! It has no value, and no money. [For a study of the WNBA broadcasts see Creedon and Wearden, 2000.]

In fact, women’s tennis might be the only clear example of a sport to which television dedicates much airtime. In 1999, for instance, the American cable channel HBO devoted an unprecedented 70 percent of its coverage to women (Mackay, 1999; see further discussion of tennis below).

Does Size Matter?

As the above discussion shows, women have gained some ground as far as media visibility is concerned, especially in major sporting events. Moreover, it can be argued that media organizations — at least in western societies — are currently far more aware of and sensitive to the need for equality in the coverage of sport. However, the question has to be asked: ‘Does size matter?’ Does more coverage necessarily bring about a truly equal representation of women in sport? Or are we simply getting more of the same? I would argue that more of certain types of portrayal (see following discussion) are even worse, since they may well fixate views of women in sport by repeating them in more volume.
Visibility is certainly important but a closer look is required at the type of coverage women’s sports and female athletes get from the media.

The Media Portrayal of Women’s Sports Female Athletes

The notion that sheer numbers are not the only important issue to consider in the context of women and mediated sport has been central to much of the research in this area (including most studies discussed so far). Indeed, the question whether sports reports of female athletes are not only fewer but also different from those of their male counterparts has been answered in the literature — including that from the early 1990s — with a clear yes, although explanations as to how exactly this takes place and what should be done to change it differ slightly.

Sabo and Curry Jansen (1992: 176), for example, argue that

... the skills and strengths of women athletes are often devalued in comparison to cultural standards linked to dominant standards of male athletic excellence, which emphasize the cultural equivalents of hegemonic masculinity: power, self-control, success, agency, and aggression.

Furthermore, according to them, whereas male athletes are ‘valorized, lionized, and put on cultural pedestals’ female athletes are infantilized by the sport commentators who refer to them as ‘girls’ or ‘young ladies’ whereas male athletes are ‘men’ or ‘young men’.

Another — much referred to in the literature — practice used by the media is the use of names in commentary. Messner et al. (1990) found, in their study of the coverage of tennis, that commentators referred to female tennis players by their first names 52.7 percent of the time and to men only 7.8 percent of the time. Pfister’s (1989) study of the coverage of the Olympics by German newspapers also showed that, while men were often addressed by their surnames, women were introduced by their first name, a nickname or a fantasy name. According to her findings, these diminutive, especially intimate or overly polite forms of address, were among the strategies which were almost exclusively applied to women. This phenomenon is perceived by the various writers as displaying a hierarchy of naming, that is, a linguistic practice which reinforces the existing gender-based status differences.

Another aspect was studied by Duncan et al. (1990): they examined the verbal descriptors applied to men and women athletes. Their finding was that men were framed as active subjects whereas women were framed as reactive objects. Furthermore, while male athletes tended to be described in terms of strengths and success, female athlete’s physical strengths tended to be neutralized by ambivalent language. Indeed, while the male performance is often linked with power metaphors (such as war) the coverage of female athletes was often framed within stereotypes that emphasized their appearance and attractiveness rather than athletic skill.

Overall, various studies found different practices by which the media trivialize, and therefore undermine, women’s athletic achievements, thus constructing female athleticism not only as ‘other than’ but as ‘lesser than’ the male’s (see
Duncan and Messner, 1998; Kane and Greendorfer, 1994; Shifflett and Revelle, 1996). More recent studies reveal that some changes did take place in this respect too. For instance, as Eastman and Billings (1999) note, NBC’s hosts and on-site reporters were careful to attribute women’s successes and failures to the same characteristics as men’s successes and failures. In their study of the 1996 Olympic Games Jones et al. (1999) found that — for female athletes playing female-appropriate sports — there was a trend in the print media accounts to focus more on describing their performance, namely providing details of what a gymnast does — ‘as opposed to simply describing how graceful she looked or how she has the personality to make her America’s next sweetheart’ (p. 190).

However, the ‘buts’ in this case outweigh the positive findings by far, a conclusion to which any of the above-mentioned studies can testify. For example, Koivula (1999) found that infantilism (‘girl’, ‘young lady/woman’) was still very much part of the language used by commentators for referring to women athletes while the language used to describe men (‘man’ and even ‘old fellow/man’) linguistically acknowledged their status as adults — this although the athletes were generally of similar age. Indeed, even as recently as the Wimbledon 2001 women’s final the commentator on Israeli television continued to constantly refer to the finalists as ‘girls’ while in the men’s final he never referred to them as ‘boys’ (in this case the men who reached the final were a little older than the women). In relation to the use of names Koivula (1999) also found that women athletes were referred to by their first names about four times as often as the men, who were referred to by their last names almost twice as often as women.

Furthermore, Jones et al.’s (1999: 190) findings in their study of the 1996 Olympics indicate:

... that the accounts of females playing the female-appropriate sport had the highest frequency of female stereotypic comments. Thus, the beauty and grace of the gymnasts was still the main point of emphasis, even with the U.S. women’s gymnastics team winning the gold medal for the first time in Olympic history.

In concluding his study of the representation of women in football-related stories during the course of the 1996 European Championships in the British popular press, Harris (1999) argues that in essence his findings serve as a confirmation of the portrayal of women in non-active roles. He adds that the message that is (still!) being portrayed to women and young girls is that sport is an essentially male activity, in which women are afforded only subordinate and/or highly sexualized roles.

This is the point I would like to turn to next.

Appearance and Attractiveness

As already briefly mentioned, among various other findings, researchers analysing the portrayal of female athletes from different perspectives found the coverage to be often framed within stereotypes which emphasize appearance and attractiveness rather than athletic skill. Moreover, scholars found that the media tend to focus on the female athletes as sexual beings, rather than serious performers (see e.g. Kane and Greendorfer, 1994). According to this argument, the
sexualization of female athletes trivializes them and in fact robs female athletes of athletic legitimacy, thus preserving hegemonic masculinity (see also report in Mackay, 1999).

As this article attempts to assess change, it is worth noting that Eastman and Billings (1999) found in their study of the 1996 Olympics that, ‘Although instances of gender stereotyping were located, their presence was not as overwhelming as expected’, but ‘as traditional gender stereotyping suggests, the descriptors applied to women athletes contained more commentary about physical appearance than the descriptors applied to men athletes’ (p. 163). Furthermore, ‘what can be labeled unfortunate stereotyping crept into the appearance descriptors’ (p.165) in the network’s preproduced profiles.

This is the issue I would like to dedicate a slightly more in-depth discussion to, considering the amount and type of coverage in two specific cases — Marion Jones and Anna Kournikova — which in my view provide interesting examples of the ways in which the media persist in emphasizing appearance and attractiveness when it comes to female athletes.

One important point to make is that the following discussion does not focus on television coverage (although see Eastman and Billings, 1999). It looks mainly at popular newspapers, magazines and websites. The reason for that is that, as mentioned before, television organizations, particularly the American ones, are far more sensitive to gender-related issues than ever before. Thus I find it more fruitful to look at the broader media world in order to reveal the existence of deeply embedded perceptions of female athletes beyond the reach of (primarily American) television executives.

Marion Jones

Clearly, no underreporting can be argued when it comes to Marion Jones, currently the fastest woman in the world. However, it is worth considering her coverage in the American media prior to the 2000 Sydney Games in which she planned on setting an athletics record by winning five gold medals. As the British journalist Sharon Krum put it, from the beginning, ‘Jones did not dare to suggest, wish, or hope she might win five medals. She declared it a certainty’ (Krum, 2000), which in turn gained her the reputation of being arrogant. According to Krum, writing prior to the Games, especially for the media:

Jones is too much. She is too boastful, too assertive, too cocksure she will bring home the gold. In short, she is displaying character traits Americans ascribe to male athletes. But in men the chest-thumping is admired. In women, it is shocking, and has led to Jones being called arrogant, pretentious, and a certain word that rhymes with rich. (Krum, 2000)

Moreover, physically, Jones is not frail or model-like thin. She is visibly strong and muscular which has long been viewed as being ‘unfeminine’ (although in the case of the then married Jones this is not linked, as in other cases, to her likelihood of being a lesbian). Combined with her strong statements, she certainly does not conform with stereotypes of femininity.

Thus, it should come as no surprise to realize that in the US media build-up towards the Sydney Games the most photographed female athlete was not Marion
Jones but Amy Acuff, a 6ft 2in blonde, part-time model high jumper who competed ‘in a series of eye-catching outrageous outfits, which include a grey fur tube top and black briefs’ (Mackay, 1999). Indeed, it was reported that her ambition was not to win an Olympic gold medal but to work on the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition: ‘Because people get a lot of attention for that’ (quoted in Mackay, 1999).

Although Marion Jones certainly attracted much media attention prior to and during the 2000 Sydney Games this pre-Games bias is yet another example of the fact that female athletes tend to gain media attention – at least as far as photographs are concerned – for what they look like and not necessarily for their sporting achievements.2

Anna Kournikova

Since the late 1990s, women’s tennis gets no less and sometimes even more media coverage than men’s tennis. In fact, in eight of the 12 Grand Slams from 1997 to 2000 more viewers watched the women’s final on American television than the men’s (Henderson, 2000). But this is not the case only because women’s tennis seems more interesting in sporting terms (see reports in Gillan, 1999; Henderson, 2000) but also, as many have noticed, due to the beauty of some of the new young players, most notably Anna Kournikova.

Although Kournikova is certainly one of the top players in the world — in the season of 2000 she was ranked 8 (according to khel.com; by April 2002, following an injury, she was ranked 65 in the singles and 13 in the doubles) — the amount and type of coverage she gains does not correlate with the fact that she has yet to win her first major singles’ title. To illustrate, during Wimbledon 2000 for every picture of the singles’ finalist Lindsay Davenport there were 20 of Kournikova in the British newspapers (Mackay, 1999).

The extensive media attention to the blonde model-looking Kournikova — also dubbed ‘tennis’s pinup girl’ (see Thomas, 2001) — clearly shows the importance certain branches of the media ascribe to looks and image over tennis skills. Indeed, as one web-based writer put it ‘the Anna Kournikova phenomenon proves you don’t need to win tournaments to get your name — and photo — in the media’ (Thomas, 2001). Moreover, as the introduction to an eight-page spread of the British Hello! magazine featuring Kournikova put it, ‘the waist-length flaxen hair, endless legs, smooth tan and metallic silver-blue eyes . . . have undoubtedly helped her into the celebrity stratosphere’ (Hello!, 1999).

In a more recent issue of the same magazine (Hello!, 2001) paparazzi photos of the sun-bathing Kournikova were printed under the headline ‘Darling of the Tennis Courts ANNA KOURNIKOVA Tops Up Her Tan on the Lawns of Her Florida Home’. The first paragraph accompanying the photographs read ‘Tennis heart-throb Anna Kournikova, whose stunning looks have launched thousands of websites and sold millions of bras and Adidas trainers, was topping up her tan recently at her £3 million Miami mansion.’ In this context it is worth mentioning that a ‘google’ search (on 26 January 2002) for ‘Anna Kournikova’ came up with nearly 200,000 results, including links to sites boasting they have ‘sexy pictures of the hottest tennis babe’.3 Although many of these sites are clearly constructed
by fans, and not by media organizations, this does reflect society’s attitude towards this tennis player.

It is worth emphasizing that the views on this phenomenon and its implications vary considerably. On the one hand, within sport itself, some view this trend as highly problematic. In her book *Les Dessous du Tennis Féminin* (titled in the English translation ‘Women’s Tennis Stripped Bare’) the French player Nathalie Tauziat claims, ‘aesthetics and charisma are winning out over sporting performance’ (quoted in Henderson, 2000). She uses Kournikova as ‘the clearest example of how the tennis circuit is now fixated on the style, and not substance, of the women’s tour’ (Henderson, 2000) and the media certainly play an important role in promoting this. According to Tauziat this phenomenon is orchestrated by the money men in tennis and the people surrounding Kournikova:

...everyone around her competes with each other to sell her image as the Lolita with the perfect figure. Who else but Anna could inspire a TV programme on the trouble line judges have in concentrating when they are seated behind her? (Quoted in Henderson, 2000; see further discussion)

And yet, some believe there is an up side to this phenomena, Chris Evert, three-time Wimbledon champion and now a commentator for NBC, said in an interview:

Girls now want to grow up and be athletes... there are attractive, appealing girls out there and now they realise that's it is okay to run around and sweat and be tough. Twenty years ago it was frowned upon and wasn't feminine. (Quoted in Mackay, 1999)

Furthermore, according to Sports Sponsorship Advisory Service, women should 'play the sex appeal card to attract more media coverage and therefore more sponsorship’ (Gillan, 1999). This suggestion infuriated Yvonne Barker, director of Women in Sport, who said:

We believe that women's sport should be sponsored for exactly the same reason as men — because they appeal to their audience for their achievement and intrinsic value. We certainly don't feel that they should be sponsored for sex and sex appeal. (Quoted in Gillan, 1999)

In this context it is important to remember that some male tennis players ride the 'sex appeal' card on their way to media exposure and lucrative sponsorship contracts. For example, one can easily find websites dedicated to sexy male tennis players such as Patrick Rafter, who in his native Australia is dubbed 'sex on legs'. In one of these sites there are photographs of Rafter changing his shirt during a match and the accompanying caption reads: ‘How come they never show this part of the match on TV??’ In fact, as evidenced from coverage of the 2001 Wimbledon Championships, for instance, TV certainly does show this part of the match, and can actually show only the men undress since the women do not change their shirts on court — although one could argue that some of the women players, like Jennifer Capriati and Venus Williams, played at Wimbledon 2001 in very skimpy outfits to begin with. Moreover, the BBC cameramen seemed particularly interested in Goran Ivanisevic’s, football-like, gesture of taking off his
In the semi-final match, the shirt was caused some concern. However, and I am consciously taking some liberty with what I assume the aforementioned caption writer’s intention was — overall, we do not see as many ‘sexy’ images of male tennis players as we do of their female counterparts.

Having said all that, it is also important to stress that Kournikova is not necessarily a ‘victim’ of the media. She herself — and the people surrounding her, as Tauziat claims — orchestrate the type of media coverage and hype she is generating. She clearly poses for many of the photographs and in general does not shy away from the ‘tennis Madonna’ label. As a result, she has made millions from endorsements and was ranked No. 54 on this year’s *Forbes* ‘Celebrity 100’ — higher than any other sportswoman (Thomas, 2001; on this list Tom Cruise was ranked no. 1 and Tiger Woods was at no. 2). In fact, the short statement explaining her ranking on the list declared:

> So what if she has more cover stories than championship trophies? Her popularity makes her the game’s top endorser. Anna-mania stretches well beyond the hard courts: Her image remains one of the most popular on the Internet…

Generally speaking, as discussed, a certain ambivalence emerges every time a female athlete is framed as a sexual being or is in fact covered by the media not for her sport performance but because she is attractive and conveys sex appeal.

Although it can be argued that the media cannot change the world, they can certainly help — alongside other societal forces — change attitudes about women in sports, but for now — with all the improvements that have been made — they still do not do enough.

**Conclusion**

Over recent years women have certainly advanced in organized, competitive sport. As this article has shown, women’s sport has also gained considerable ground as far as media visibility is concerned. As Anita DeFrantz — the first woman to reach the International Olympic Committee vice-presidency — put it, ‘The good news is, finally journalists have realised that we’re here to stay. There are wonderful stories to be told’ (quoted in Mackay, 1999). Based on recent studies I tend to agree with this statement, at least to some extent. Overall, many steps have been taken in the right direction, especially in relation to the amount of coverage women’s sport and female athletes get in major sporting events, such as the Olympic Games. Indeed, studies of the 1996 Games clearly show that women’s sports and female athletes are being covered more than ever before, and I assume that forthcoming studies of the 2000 Sydney Games will show a greater improvement still. However, the day-to-day, routine coverage — which is less studied — still has a long way to go before it reflects in a more realistic manner the sporting activity of women in the sport realm.

A certain shift also occurred in the type of coverage of women’s sports and female athletes get. Thus, for example, reporters tend to attribute successes and failures to the same characteristics when covering female and male athletes and
— in the print media — reports focus more than before on describing women’s sporting performance rather than describing them in terms of their looks. And yet, recent research findings show that practices used to undermine women’s sporting achievements — and identified in the past — are still very much in evidence. These include, for instance, the language used by commentators which, among other things, acknowledges male athletes as adults while female athletes are infantilized. Moreover, accounts of females athletes — particularly when playing female-appropriate sports — still include female stereotypic comments.

All of which continues to send a message that sport is in essence a male activity, in which women play only a subordinate and/or sexualized role. This, as I have argued, is the bad news. Looking more closely at the ‘wonderful stories’ told, particularly by certain branches of the media, about female athletes such as Marion Jones and Anna Kournikova it becomes clear that the appearance and attractiveness of female athletes — from a male perspective — are an important factor in explaining the type of media coverage they get. In this respect it is much too early for a victory lap.

In view of my discussion some questions beg to be asked. If more media coverage means more sexualized images is more necessarily better? Or is more even worse? If the moment we step aside a little from the more aware — and ‘politically correct’ American television coverage — we still find much emphasis on appearance and attractiveness when it comes to female athletes, to what extent did the media’s views of them, and by extension society’s, truly change? Is any media story ‘good news’ as far as female athletes are concerned as long as they spell the name right? Politically correct or merely cosmetic changes in media coverage do not undermine the strongly gendered nature of the type or form of coverage. The answer, therefore, to this final question, must be a resounding ‘No’.

Notes

1. More complex studies are currently also emerging using various methodologies, such as, for example, the semiotic analysis of the representation of the Wimbledon Championships of 1996 on British television conducted by Kennedy (2001) which considers televised sport as a gendered genre, arguing that a gendered narrative exists within the televising of Wimbledon.
2. To that it should be added that on the Internet it is by far easier to find sites dedicated to photos of Acuff than to photos of Jones.
3. http://www.annakova.com; it should be noted that ‘results’ do not correlate with sites, the case may well be that some of these links appear more than once and/or that some ‘results’ link to sites in which the name ‘Anna Kournikova’ is only mentioned in passing. Be that as it may, this figure is astounding when considering that the same search for number 1 ranked tennis player at the time of writing, Jennifer Capriati, came up with only 37,000 results.
6. For the initial discussion of the term ‘ambivalence’ in regard to media portrayal of female athletes, see Duncan and Hasbrook (1988).
7. This article, in similar vein to much of the literature found in this field, focused on the content of the media. However, as various writers point out (see e.g. Creedon, 1998), in order to draw a wider picture attention should be also paid to the production (see Cramer, 1994; Schmitt, 1996)
and consumption (see Cooper-Chen, 1994; Tuggle and Owen, 1999) ends of mediated sport in order to provide a wider context to the understanding of the media’s role in relation to women’s place in the sports world. In mentioning the production end, it is also worth noting that some of the articles I quoted in my own discussion have been written by journalists — although, it should be added, not sports writers (for recent changes in sports writing in the US see Stout, 2000).

References


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