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and in the Feature Articles of Women's
Sports and Fitness Magazine, 1975-1989

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AN ANALYSIS OF SPORTSWOMEN ON THE COVERS AND IN THE FEATURE ARTICLES OF WOMEN'S SPORTS AND FITNESS MAGAZINE, 1975-1989

This study analyzes the treatment of athletes in Women's Sports and Fitness between 1975 and 1989. Author, article length, gender, race, and sporting role were assessed for each article; the number of accompanying pictures to each article and the characteristics of those featured in the articles were also tallied. Gender, race, sport, and active or posed status of the individual appearing on the cover were coded. Whites were featured in 92% of the articles, mostly in tennis, running, track, basketball, and golf. Of the 151 covers, 98.7% showed females with 92% whites and 8% blacks. This magazine, on its covers and in its feature articles, changed its emphasis from reporting on traditional sports and competitions to focusing on fitness activities for all women.

Initially published in 1975, the magazine *WomenSport* was created to help celebrate the sporting achievements of outstanding female athletes and to legitimize women in sports. In the 1970s, communities, schools, colleges, and independent organizations slowly began to provide more competitive opportunities for females. Women were at last receiving begrudging approval for seeking their athletic potentials. No longer did laws, such as Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act requiring equal opportunity, permit private clubs and publicly-funded programs to exclude females. Growing out of this "women in sports phenomenon" was the physical fitness boom. While only a few could become elite athletes, all females could increase their fitness levels and find recreational activities to enjoy. To appeal to this new, larger market in 1984, this magazine changed its target market and title (to *Women's Sports and Fitness*). This magazine increasingly provided stories for the average fitness buff along with feature articles about star athletes.

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

Media treatment of sporting women has been plagued by considerable problems. Poe (1976) examined advertisements in two family and two women's magazines for the years 1928, 1956, and 1972 to see how sportswomen were portrayed. She found an emphasis on recreational, non-competitive individual or dual activities and discovered that usually sportswomen were posed, not shown in activity. Rintala and Birrell (1984) also found more females than males in posed shots in their study of the *Young Athlete* magazine. Boutilier and San Giovanni (1983) found that magazines as diverse as *Ms.* and *Sports Illustrated* treated women athletes in quite traditional and stereotypic ways. Hilliard (1984) concluded that magazine feature articles about female tennis players trivialized their athletic achievements. He found that male

tennis stars received praise for their physical prowess and skillful performances, while coverage of women players emphasized clothing, hair styles, and mannerisms, thus stressing the stereotypic "feminine" over athletic identities.

Kane (1988, 1989) concluded that women in "sex-appropriate" sports were featured significantly more often than those in other sports in her analysis of *Sports Illustrated* articles and other media coverage. Lumpkin and Williams (1991), in their comprehensive study of *Sports Illustrated* feature articles, found that white females in golf, tennis, and swimming received the most coverage. They found black females featured in only basketball, tennis, ice skating, and track and field.

In an examination of televised women's sports, Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) reported a profound ambivalence in the reporting of basketball, surfing, and marathon events. They concluded that a trivialization of female athletes' physical efforts and athletic achievements was one way of denying power to women. Similarly, Lumpkin and Williams (1991) found that male authors of *Sports Illustrated* feature articles frequently characterized sportswomen using derogatory and sexist terms.

The purpose of this study was to determine if feature articles and covers in the only magazine focusing on sportswomen characterized females traditionally or acclaimed their sporting achievements. The following questions were asked:

1. In which sports did the athletes who were pictured on the covers compete?
2. Were the athletes on the covers pictured actively participating in their sports, or were they posed?
3. With what frequency were black athletes or white athletes pictured on the covers?
4. In which sports did the greatest number of featured athletes compete?
5. In which sports did the athletes written about in the longest feature articles (measured in column inches) compete?
6. In which sports did the athletes who were pictured in the feature articles the greatest number of times compete?
7. Did this magazine reinforce or break down the traditional myth of only certain sports being appropriate for women through its selection of featured female athletes and their sports?
8. With what frequency were black athletes or white athletes the central focus of feature articles?
9. Did this publication reinforce or destroy stereotypic attitudes toward black sportswomen through its selection of featured athletes and their sports?
10. Were the females highlighted in the feature articles ever described using sexist terms by male authors?
11. Did this publication change from its initial emphasis on acclaiming the achievement of female athletes to primarily focusing on recreational activities?

METHOD

Each of the 301 feature articles in *Women's Sports and Fitness* between 1975 and 1989 were read and analyzed by both authors. Coding done separately by each author was compared to verify the accuracy of all categorical data. Stories about the sporting achievements of athletes, coaches, and significant sports figures were the only ones defined as feature articles. Excluded were articles about equipment, clothing, and results of competitions. Quantitative assessments of the primary individual pictured on each of the 151 covers were made of the gender, race and sport of the athlete. A qualitative assessment of whether the pictured individual was shown in an active or

a posed shot was made; the cover was coded as posed if the athlete or non-athlete was shown in a stationary shot rather than engaged in sport and activity. Quantitative assessments of each article included article length in column inches, number of pictures, author's gender, and the gender, race, and sport of the primary featured athlete. Qualitative assessments of each article identified language about women athletes that trivialized their achievements, reinforced stereotypes by emphasizing traditional "feminine" traits, or broke stereotypes by describing traditional masculine athletic prowess.

RESULTS

The 151 covers pictured mostly females (98.7%), with only two males being pictured. Non-athletes were shown on 44.7% of the covers. Almost all of the non-athletes and 58.3% of the athletes were shown in posed shots, rather than actively participating. All of the non-athletes (n=46) and 47 of the athletes were pictured on covers but not written about in feature articles. Whites were shown on 92% of the covers. Blacks pictured on 12 covers included Cheryl Miller (3 times), 2 group photographs of basketball players, four track athletes (Evelyn Ashford, Jodi Anderson, Stephanie Hightower, and Valerie Brisco), Linda Jefferson (football), Flo Hyman (volleyball), and Debi Thomas (figure skating). Individuals participating in recreational activities such as jogging, aerobics, and cycling predominated (n=36) on the covers. Table 1 lists all of the sports pictured two or more times on the covers.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF WOMEN ATHLETES AS PICTURED ON COVERS AND FEATURED
IN ARTICLES IN WOMEN'S SPORTS AND FITNESS MAGAZINE, 1975-1989

SPORT	TIMES ON COVER	TOTAL ARTICLES	ARTICLES AVG. LENGTH (INCHES)	AVG. # OF PICTURES
Auto Racing	1	6	40.2	6.5
Basketball	8 ¹	18	49.9	4.3
Body Building	0	4	42.0	4.0
Cycling	5	7	54.0	3.4
Equitation	4	4	37.8	2.5
Figure Skating	9 ²	16	42.2	3.5
Golf	6	17	38.2	3.6
Gymnastics	5	5	57.6	6.6
Running	11	23	42.0	3.7
Sailing	2	3	33.7	1.7
Snow Skiing	8	11	44.7	3.1
Softball	2	7	45.6	3.8
Speed Skating	3	4	35.0	4.3
Swimming/Diving	9	15	42.6	3.1
Surfing	0	4	34.5	4.0
Tennis	20	40	47.5	3.9
Track	12 ³	22	54.0	4.0
Triathlon	3	5	47.0	4.0
Volleyball	2 ⁴	10	50.4	3.2
Weight Lifting	3	4	26.8	5.3

¹5 blacks ²1 black ³4 blacks ⁴1 black

Between 1975-1978 under the title of *WomenSports*, primarily athletes were pictured on the covers with about one-fourth of the females on the covers depicting recreational activities. During the era when the publication was named *Women's Sports* (1979-1983), athletes, rather than non-athletes, were featured on the cover at a ratio of 12 to 1. A dramatic change occurred in 1985, when for the first time non-athletes outnumbered athletes on the covers. This trend continued and even increased throughout the 1980s. For example, a comparison of the Olympic years of 1984 and 1988 showed that: (1) in 1984—athletes on the covers (including two blacks) outnumbered non-athletes at a five to one ratio; and (2) in 1988—non-athletes outnumbered athletes five to one, and no blacks were pictured.

Feature articles on women (n=292) focused on athletes in tennis (n=40), running (n=23), track (n=22), basketball (n=18), golf (n=17), figure skating (n=16), swimming (n=15), snow skiing (n=11), and volleyball (n=10) the greatest number of times. Feature articles about white women predominated (92%), with only 23 feature articles (8%) publicizing the sporting achievements of black athletes. Nearly 70% of these were about track athletes (n=10) or basketball players (n=5).

Athletes in gymnastics were written about in the longest articles, based on average length in column inches. The next lengthiest articles were recorded for the sports of cycling (54.0), track (54.0), and volleyball (50.4). The individual described in the longest article was track athlete Martha Watson. Gymnasts were also pictured in article photographs most frequently (6.6 per article). Athletes in auto racing (6.5), dance (6.3), and water skiing (6.0) were shown the next highest number of times. Jane Fonda was the individual pictured most often (n=16) in one feature article. The number of feature articles per issue decreased from 2.66 in 1975-78 to 1.91 in 1979-83 to 1.15 in 1984-89.

Although most of the feature articles were authored by females, a surprisingly large number of males wrote for this magazine. In the 195 feature articles written by male authors, alarming incidents of sexist and stereotypic language were found. For example, in 1975, auto racer Lella Lombardi was described as a castrated male; in 1976, tennis champion Virginia Wade was said to be sensuous on the court while playing a masculine game in a feminine way; in 1977, swimmer Gertrude Ederle was characterized as having many attributes of a male giant; and in 1984 the male author proclaimed that heptathlete star Jodi Anderson's obvious muscularity and unceasing athleticism wrecked havoc on tightly-held notions of femininity.

DISCUSSION

The increasing dominance of whites on the magazine's covers who were engaged in recreational activities on the covers of *Women's Sports and Fitness* suggests a market shift to females more interested in personal fitness and fun than in competitive sports. After the magazine changed its focus in the mid- to late 1980s, fewer athletes were pictured on the covers. Throughout its history, this publication predominately showed athletes in tennis, running, track, golf, figure skating, basketball, swimming, snow skiing, and volleyball, all sex-appropriate sports according to Kane (1988), except for basketball.

This study's finding that the individuals on the covers seldom were shown actively participating supports findings by Poe (1976) and Rintala and Birrell (1984)

that sportswomen frequently have been pictured in posed shots, rather than actively participating. The use of non-athletes on the covers, rather than athletes, amplifies this trend. Such coverage de-emphasizes the sporting achievements of females and is disconcerting in a publication advocating *Women's Sports and Fitness* activities.

The few black athletes, mainly in basketball and track, pictured on the covers reinforces trends in the coverage of black sportswomen. The sparse coverage given the accomplishments of black athletes could be attributed to marketing economics, fewer black female athletes in sports, or racial discrimination.

Confirming the findings of Kane (1988, 1989) and Lumpkin and Williams (1991), female athletes in the sports of tennis, running, track, golf, figure skating, swimming, snow skiing, and gymnastics were featured more frequently, in longer articles, and pictured more often. This magazine's treatment reinforces Kane's (1988) claim that reporting disproportionately focuses on what are deemed to be sex-appropriate sports.

A few male authors trivialized the achievements of female athletes using sexist terminology. Although only selected blatant examples have been provided, the fact that such language was printed in this magazine raises questions about its goals and confirms the findings of Hilliard (1984) and Duncan and Hasbrook (1988). We might expect treatment of sportswomen in *Sports Illustrated* (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991) to be described in more consistent sexist terms, yet, *Women's Sports and Fitness* was at times just as egregious in its language usage. Additional research is needed to determine how extensively male authors in various other magazines depict sportswomen using sexist terminology.

CONCLUSION

Initially, *Women's Sports and Fitness* magazine primarily lauded the sporting achievements of female athletes. However, this magazine's attempt to find a market may have actually reinforced several restrictive attitudes: (1) non-athletes, rather than athletes who have achieved significantly in their sports, were more likely to be pictured on this magazine's covers; (2) females pictured on the covers would probably be shown posed, rather than displaying their athletic prowess; (3) black athletes seldom could expect to be featured or pictured; (4) playing aggressive team sports would not lead to as much magazine coverage as would participating in the traditional sex-appropriate sports; and (5) athletes written about by males risked being described in terms devaluing their sporting achievements.

With its changing focus *Women's Sport and Fitness* may have relinquished its leadership role in promoting active sports competition for women. Its selection of who to feature on covers or in articles and what sports or activities to picture or to describe certainly changed during the years studied. The magazine editors obviously believed that fitness, rather than competitive achievements, appealed to a broader audience. However, with this change, the aspirations of girls and women may be thwarted as they miss the message that being a competitive athlete and female are compatible.

AUTHORS

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