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Ronald Bishop

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MISSING IN ACTION

Feature Coverage of Women's Sports in *Sports Illustrated*

Ronald Bishop

This analysis follows up work in the late 1970s analyzing Sports Illustrated's coverage of women's sports in Olympic years 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976. This article analyzes feature articles in the first issue of each month of Sports Illustrated beginning in 1980, with 72 issues reviewed for total number of articles per issue, sex of athlete featured in each article, number of pages per article, and type of sport covered in each article. An exploration of photographs accompanying the articles is included. In all, 569 articles were reviewed. Although there was an increase in feature coverage of women's sports in the early 1990s, the change in coverage for the entire period compared with the period analyzed previously was not significant in percentage of articles about women and percentage of pages devoted to coverage of women's sports. The percentage of photos featuring women dropped dramatically from 1994 to 1996.

Keywords: *journalism; sports writing; mass media; portrayal of women*

Women's collegiate and professional sports are more popular than ever. As I write this, the U.S. women's soccer team is still basking in the adulation from its hard-fought 1999 World Cup victory over China, and the Women's National Basketball Association has completed a successful second season marked by the birth of a dynasty (the Houston Comets), growing attendance, and higher public profiles for many of its players, including Cheryl Cooper and Rebecca Lobo. Buoyed by the success of a widening circle of athletic role models, more young female athletes are participating in organized sports.

Many scholars argue, however, that news media coverage of women's sports does not reflect this success—that despite some truly significant, well-publicized accomplishments, women's sports have not yet secured a permanent spot on the public's agenda. More publications (e.g., Conde Nast's *Women's Sports and Fitness*) and Web sites (<http://www.sportsforwomen.com> and <http://www.gogirlmag.com>) are aimed at female athletes, but the country's major newspapers and most important sports magazines have only marginally increased the amount of coverage devoted to the accomplishments of female athletes. Even with this small victory, female athletes find themselves in a bit of a double bind. For years, scholars have

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attacked coverage of women's sports as being sexist—laced with diminutives and talk of emotional fragility instead of physical strength. When Brandi Chastain of the World Cup soccer team ripped off her jersey in celebration of her World Cup-winning shootout goal, she was criticized by some journalists for flaunting her appearance (as she had months earlier by appearing naked in *Gear* magazine) and, in doing so, setting back the cause of feminism. This suggests that journalists now cover female athletes as if they are always acting to advance the cause of what passes for feminism today. Focusing on Chastain's gesture of elation and Ally McBeal's short skirts and pining for a man, however, only limits the discourse about women. The content analysis reported here focuses on the nation's most popular sports magazine, *Sports Illustrated* (*SI*), in an attempt to determine whether *SI* reflects the increased popularity of women's sports in its feature coverage.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The analysis is a follow-up to work done by Reid and Soley (1979) in the late 1970s. The authors analyzed *SI*'s coverage of women's sports in the Olympic years 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976. This content analysis begins in 1980, 4 years after the last year analyzed by Reid and Soley. Since their work was published, a number of developments have stimulated public interest in women's sports. First, two new professional basketball leagues, the American Basketball League and the Women's National Basketball Association, began play, the American Basketball League in 1995 and the Women's National Basketball Association in 1996. Both leagues had national television contracts and played to sizable crowds in a number of major cities. The American Basketball League, however, announced in late 1998 that it was suspending operations.

Second, women's collegiate athletics are more popular than ever thanks in part to more coverage by broadcast and cable television networks. A number of outstanding collegiate athletes, including basketball players Rebecca Lobo and Dawn Staley, have capitalized on this surge in popularity by moving from college into new professional leagues and by signing lucrative product endorsement deals. Finally, the Olympics have produced a growing number of popular female athletes in the period since Reid and Soley's (1979) study, including figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi, speed skater Bonnie Blair, and the seven female gymnasts who took America by storm by winning the team gold medal in the 1996 summer Olympics in Atlanta, a feat replicated by the U.S. women's ice hockey team at the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan.

At the same time, however, sports journalists still tend to highlight only the feminine characteristics of many female athletes. These competitors "are still apologizing for their competitive drive by dressing and acting like girls" (Nelson, 1998, p. 147), an idea supported in some of the material discussed later. The media pay more attention to how a female athlete dresses and acts than to the level of her performance, Nelson (1998) argued.

Such portrayals of female athletes say, in effect, "We're winners, but we'll still look pretty for you. We're not threatening. We're strong but feminine. We're not ugly, not bad marriage material" (Nelson, 1998, p. 146). Female athletes must abide by two sets of rules; they must be competitive as well as "kind, nurturing, accommodating, nonthreatening, placating, pretty, and small" (Nelson, 1998, p. 147).

Given the gains made by female athletes in male-dominated sports such as basketball, it is ironic that figure skating—a sport in which female competitors are judged, Nelson (1998) claimed, "as beauty contestants are judged" (p. 147)—is the most televised women's sport. The sport sends a mixed message to young female viewers: "Figure skating allows women to compete like champions while dressed like cheerleaders" (p. 147), Nelson argued. From October 1996 to March 1997, ESPN, TBS, and USA, the four major television networks and cable programming services, aired 162.5 hours of figure skating, half of it in prime time. During telecasts, female skaters are referred to as "little girl dancers," "fairy tale princesses," and "little angels." The hours of hard work and training disappear amid a chorus of fawning diminution. According to Nelson, "Commentators frame skaters as small, young, and decorative creatures, not superwomen but fairy-tale figments of the imagination" (p. 147).

Daddario (1994) argued that the media tend to "reinforce a masculine sports hegemony" (p. 275) in its coverage of sports. Messner (1988) contended that "the choices, the filtering, the entire mediation of the sporting event . . . tends to support corporate, White, and male-dominant ideologies" (p. 211). Researchers have followed both quantitative and qualitative paths in examining print and broadcast media coverage of women's sports. For example, Duncan (1990) has analyzed photos of female athletes and of children engaged in play. Alexander (1994) looked for evidence of gender bias in British television coverage of important athletic events. A few recent studies have focused on the language used by television announcers in describing athletic events. Messner, Duncan, and Jensen (1993) found clear gender bias in coverage of six 1989 NCAA basketball tournament games and several matches from the 1989 U.S. Open tennis tournament. During the basketball telecasts, announcers mentioned the female players' sex 77 times but never mentioned the sex of the male basketball players. Halbert and Latimer (1994) found the same asymmetrical gender marking in their analysis of the 1992 exhibition tennis match between Martina Navratilova and Jimmy Connors. Furthermore, Messner et al. found that female tennis players were referred to by their first names almost eight times more often than were male players. Excellent shots made by female players were usually attributed to luck not skill, the authors found.

In her analysis of coverage of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games, Daddario (1994) found that announcers apologized more for poor performance of male athletes than for female athletes. Announcers also tended to frame the performance of female athletes "according to an adolescent ideal" (Daddario, 1994, p. 275). She cited references to Olympic speed skating

champion Bonnie Blair as “America’s little sister” (p. 282) to support her idea that female athletes were rarely treated as adult competitors. It seems reasonable to argue that the result of these coverage themes and trends is that readers and viewers tend not to take women’s sports as seriously as men’s sports. Furthermore, the overall lack of coverage cited in many studies prevents women’s sports from building and sustaining an audience, as argued by Duncan and Messner (1998). Television networks go to great lengths to build an audience for flagship events such as the World Series and the Super Bowl. Audience-building strategies include selecting certain athletes to become media “personalities,” relying on network and local news coverage to heighten anticipation, deploying extensive print and television advertising, and using the pregame and halftime shows in other broadcasts to stimulate interest in the event. Duncan and Messner noted that these strategies have not been used to build an audience for women’s sports. Lack of promotion in combination with inferior production values “virtually guaranteed less audience interest in the women’s competitions” (Duncan & Messner, 1998, p. 174). Television producers contend that the predominantly male audience for televised sports simply is not interested in women’s sports. These producers feel they are giving their audience what it wants, as Duncan and Messner argued. However, “the increasing participation rates of girls and women in sport do not support the notion that women don’t care about watching women’s sports” (Duncan & Messner, 1998, p. 173). Without a sustained audience, journalists can justify not affording women’s sports more coverage.

Reid and Soley (1979) selected *SI* for their analysis because it claims to offer the most comprehensive coverage of all sports and reaches 3.15 million readers (*Bacon’s Magazine Directory*, 1995). The analysis was conducted for the Olympic years since the Reid and Soley study: 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1994 (the first year of alternating summer and winter games), and 1996. Then as now, it was assumed that coverage of women’s sports would peak during these years because *SI* devotes a large amount of coverage to the Olympics. Furthermore, the final year covered in the study, 1996, also was the first year of play for the American Basketball League (which has since folded). Plans to launch the Women’s National Basketball Association also were announced in 1996.

Treatment of gender and of race in *SI* has been explored in a number of studies. Kane (1988) and others have found that when the magazine covers women, it does so in “aesthetically pleasing” events such as figure skating, gymnastics, and tennis. Condor and Anderson (1984) discovered that the magazine offered only limited coverage of African American athletes until the mid-1970s, when the number of African American athletes increased. Francis (1990) and Lumpkin and Williams (1991) found that despite this increase, feature coverage of African American athletes was not proportional to their participation in sports. Lumpkin and Williams also found that *SI* published fewer articles on female athletes than on male athletes. Feature articles on female athletes were generally shorter than those on male

athletes, the authors found. In her analysis of *SI*'s swimsuit issue, Duncan (1993) argued that objectification of women, commodification, and voyeurism were "formal media structures that contribute to sexism and stereotyping in the media" (Kinkema & Harris, 1998, pp. 38-39). The swimsuit issue sexually objectifies women and symbolically subordinates them to the erotic desires of men, according to Davis (1997). Davis interviewed *SI* readers as well as individuals who work for the magazine. She concluded that the swimsuit issue is built on hegemonic masculinity in order to sustain *SI*'s predominantly male audience.

Against the backdrop created by Reid and Soley (1979), this study asks the question, "Has the surge in popularity of women's sports motivated *SI* to increase its coverage of these sports?" The study also attempts to shed some light on how the magazine depicts women who appear in its pages.

METHOD

Only the feature articles in the first issue of each month of *SI* were analyzed for all 6 years—a replication of Reid and Soley's (1979) method. All told, 72 issues were reviewed. Feature articles for the period 1980 to 1996 were compared with feature articles from 1956 to 1976. A feature article was defined as one that was described at length in the issue's table of contents. Excluded from the analysis were regular columns, recurring features (e.g., letters to the editor) and previews, or scouting reports on the so-called major sports (baseball, football, basketball, and hockey). These articles occur at set points throughout the year. It was felt that following Reid and Soley's method would ensure a valid comparison. The author reviewed all of the articles and photos.

The following data categories were established:

- total number of articles per issue,
- sex of the featured athlete,
- number of pages per article, and
- type of sport covered in each article.

Added to this list was a category for the number of photographs that accompanied each article. Reid and Soley (1979) did not tabulate the photos in their analysis, claiming it was difficult to determine whether a photo was decorative or contributed to the article. For this analysis, a photo was reported if it included men and/or women and was captioned. Categories were established for number of photos featuring men, number of photos featuring women, and photos featuring both sexes ("joint" photos).

Analyzed separately (again following Reid and Soley's [1979] lead) was the number of articles about women's participation in basketball, golf, and tennis. Participation by women in these three sports has increased dramatically in the period under study, especially during the 1990s. For example, women's college basketball has seen its popularity—and its television

TABLE 1

Feature Coverage of Women's Sports in *Sports Illustrated*

	Percentage of Articles About Women	Percentage of Pages About Women	Percentage of Pages About Three Sports ^a
1996 ^b	3.3	2.5	.07
1994 ^b	9.6	7.0	.04
1992 ^b	9.1	6.6	1.8
1988 ^b	6.6	4.8	.04
1984 ^b	2.4	0.8	0
1980 ^b	5.3	5.5	0
1976	6.9	4.3	1.7
1972	4.7	3.4	0
1968	5.2	3.8	1.8
1964	3.2	1.6	5.6
1960	6.8	5.9	1.1
1956	4.3	1.8	0

a. Tennis, golf, and basketball

b. Years reviewed for this study.

ratings—increase dramatically during this decade. The number of pages covering these sports and the percentage of pages devoted to women's participation in these sports were calculated.

RESULTS

In all, 569 articles (2,919 pages) were reviewed. The average number of articles analyzed per year was 95. The average number of feature stories per issue was 7.9, up from the six-feature average reported by Reid and Soley in 1979. Features averaged 5.13 pages in length, a little less than the 5.3 pages reported by Reid and Soley. The amount of feature coverage given to women's sports since 1956 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 reveals a slight increase in the percentage of feature articles on women in 1992 and 1994, but the figure dropped off dramatically in 1996. Furthermore, the percentage of feature stories on men was not less than 80% in the years reviewed for this study (1980 to 1996). Although there was an increase in coverage in the early 1990s, a *t* test revealed that the change in the coverage for the period analyzed here from the period analyzed by Reid and Soley (1979) was not significant both in terms of the percentage of articles about women ($t = -.65$, $df = 10$, not significant) and the percentage of pages devoted to coverage of women's sports ($t = -.90$, $df = 10$, not significant). Feature coverage of the three sports combined for separate analysis by Reid and Soley has been close to nonexistent in the period studied here. One fifth of the 35 feature articles were on figure skating ($n = 7$). Speed skating and golf each received five feature articles. Four feature articles on track and field appeared in the issues analyzed here.

A category was also created for articles in which men and women shared the focus of the articles. A "shared focus" article was defined as one in

TABLE 2
Shared Focus Feature Coverage in *Sports Illustrated*

	Number of Articles With Shared Focus	Percentage of Articles With Shared Focus	Number of Pages With Shared Focus	Percentage of Pages With Shared Focus
1996	7	7.0	37	7.3
1994	8	7.7	43	8.6
1992	10	9.1	73	14.3
1988	8	7.5	49	9.5
1984	9	11.0	75	15.4
1980	9	11.8	53	13.2

which men and women shared the story headline or were featured relatively equally in the body of the story. For example, if a story on the Wimbledon tennis tournament covered both male and female players, it was categorized as a "shared focus" article. Reid and Soley (1979) did not analyze shared focus articles in their study. Findings for shared focus articles are reported in Table 2. Here, only the years 1980 to 1996 are included.

Table 2 shows that the number of shared focus articles has declined in the period under study both in terms of the number of articles and the number of pages. The past 3 years reviewed for the study, 1992, 1994, and 1996, reveal a particularly steep drop in the number of pages devoted to shared focus articles.

As noted earlier, the number of photos accompanying feature stories that highlighted men and women was also calculated. A photo was categorized as a "joint" photo if men and women were equally featured (e.g., if the same number of men and women were included in the photo). Photos were categorized as "inanimate" if they featured crowds, animals (typically found with articles on horse racing, hunting, or dog shows), or vehicles (typically found with articles on auto racing). The number of photos featuring women and the number of photos featuring men and women are reported in Table 3. Again, only the years since the Reid and Soley (1979) study are included.

As with the overall feature coverage of women, the percentage of photos featuring women has dropped dramatically from 9.8% ($n = 55$) of all photos in 1994 to 4.4% ($n = 18$) of all photos in 1996. Photos of women appeared more frequently early in the period studied here. In 1980, women appeared in 12.1% of the photos appearing in *SI* feature stories. By 1996, however, *SI* published just 18 photos of women to accompany feature stories. Male athletes were the focus of 90.6% of the photos ($n = 366$) appearing in the 1996 feature stories reviewed here. The lowest percentage of male-oriented photos in any of the years since Reid and Soley's (1979) study is 79.6%. The number of joint photos also has fallen in the period under study, reaching a low point (14) in 1996. These findings come at a time when women's sports have supposedly reached new heights of popularity.

TABLE 3

Percentage of Photos Featuring Women and Featuring Men and Women in
Sports Illustrated

	Number of Photos Featuring Women	Percentage of Photos Featuring Women	Number of Photos Featuring Men and Women	Percentage of Photos Featuring Men and Women
1996	18	4.4	14	3.5
1994	55	9.8	28	5.0
1992	37	7.8	37	7.8
1988	60	10.1	19	3.2
1984	34	6.9	40	8.1
1980	37	12.1	16	5.8

TABLE 4

Nonathletic Roles Played by Women in Shared Focus Photos

	Wife	Girlfriend	Family Member	Fan	Other or Unknown
1980	10	1	3	3	3
1984	15	1	10	10	0
1988	9	2	9	3	0
1992	8	4	8	2	0
1994	7	2	7	3	4
1996	5	0	4	0	4

It should be noted that many of the joint photos cast women in decidedly secondary or supporting roles (see Table 4). In 1980, for example, wives and girlfriends of male athletes appeared in joint photos 11 times. Of the 28 joint photos reviewed in 1994, 15 featured the wives, girlfriends, daughters, or mothers of male athletes. Four of the photos featured actress Halle Berry, who was then married to Cleveland Indians outfielder David Justice. One of the photos, again accompanying an article on a male athlete, showed a number of waitresses in a restaurant. A shared focus photo from 1980 depicted a group of female fans—a “gaggle of gigglers” the caption read—trying to talk with baseball hall-of-famer George Brett. In 1992, four joint photos showed skiing great Alberto Tomba with what the article called his “exploits”—women he had reportedly met during his Olympic experience in Albertville, France. One of the female athlete photos from 1992 featured Olympic swimming medalist Summer Sanders wearing a bathing suit and posing like an *SI* swimsuit model. Five of the 1992 and 1996 joint photos showed the wives, mothers, or daughters of male athletes. One 1992 article on NBA star Dominique Wilkins included a photo of his wife, Nicole, who had “greatly curtailed the influence” in Wilkins’ life of his mother, Gertrude Baker. Julie Parisien, a U.S. Olympic skier, said that the thing most missing from her life

was “a boyfriend.” A photo accompanying a story of a baseball star showed that he was so busy that he hired a secretary and included the male athlete’s wedding photo. Analysis of these and similar photos adds weight to claims by Nelson (1998) and others that the media highlight the femininity, not the competitive spirit, of female athletes. Furthermore, women not central to many of the stories reviewed here are portrayed by the media in “traditional” roles.

DISCUSSION

SI does not yet reflect the growing popularity of women’s sports. There has not been a significant increase in the feature coverage of women’s sports in the 20 years of *SI* published since Reid and Soley (1979) conducted their study. The almost complete absence of women from the feature pages of *SI* in 1996 comes after a period of some (but not significant) growth in the number of feature articles about women. These findings offer a degree of support for Tuchman’s (1978) contention that the mass media “symbolically annihilate” women by underrepresenting them and trivializing their accomplishments. Although female athletes are beginning to compete successfully in traditionally “male” sports, the definition of athlete, at least the one written on the pages of *SI*, does not yet include women. It is worth noting that only three of the feature stories analyzed here discussed women’s achievements in traditionally “male” sports (two on college basketball and one on soccer).

The data also reveal that photos of female athletes are becoming harder to find in *SI*. Only 18 photos of female athletes accompanied feature coverage in the 1996 issues of the magazine reviewed here. Perhaps even more revealing is the fact that the photos in which men and women appear together often show women in secondary roles—as supportive wives or girlfriends, for example. Such a finding supports Davis’s (1997) contention that hegemonic masculinity, with a preference for heterosexual representation of athletes as one of its main elements, is a central theme in *SI*’s pages.

These results may not be surprising to some because *SI*’s readership is predominantly men (78%). Some have argued that *SI* would run the risk of alienating much of its readership base if it started to run a proportional number of articles about women’s sports. In response, I raise two points: First, the magazine has long promoted itself as the nation’s preeminent sports magazine. *SI*’s listing in a recent *Bacon’s Magazine Directory* (1996) stated that the magazine is “targeted to both participants and spectators of sporting activities” (p. 1044). It is not unreasonable to argue that “sporting activities” means all sports. Second, women’s sports are more popular than ever on both the professional and the collegiate levels. As a result, they have become more newsworthy and thereby more attractive to journalists. *SI* is simply not making good on its promise to readers to provide in-depth coverage of all sports. Without coverage from “mainstream” media such as *SI*, women’s sports may be unable to build sustained audiences.

In 1997, *SI* launched the short-lived *Women/Sport*, a publication devoted to women’s athletics. Defenders of *SI* argued that in launching the

magazine, *SI*'s parent company, Time Warner, was taking women's athletics seriously. However, *Women/Sport* was not a weekly publication; before it folded in 1998, it was published four times a year. And although there are a number of publications aimed at fans of women's sports (Conde Nast's *Women's Sports and Fitness*, for example), the fact remains that *SI* is regarded as the nation's top sports magazine. Future research should explore whether the imbalance in coverage of women's sports in *SI* extends to the sports sections of the nation's leading newspapers—an extension of seminal research done in 1990 by the Amateur Athletic Foundation.

AUTHOR

Ronald Bishop is an assistant professor of communication at Drexel University where he teaches courses in journalism, media studies, and public relations. His research interests include journalist sourcing patterns, news media coverage of sports, and narrative and textual analysis. He received a Ph.D. in communications from Temple University in 1997.

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