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# Homophobia, Heterosexism, AND Ambivalence IN THE Premier Issue of *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport*

LISA M. WEIDMAN

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## INTRODUCTION

On April 21, 1997, a new magazine from Time, Inc. landed on newsstands: A spin-off of the highly successful *Sports Illustrated*, designed specifically for female readers, it was called *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport*. Eventually, the name changed—first to *Sports Illustrated for Women*, later to *Sports Illustrated Women*, and the emphasis shifted from women's sports to personal fitness. Finally, citing difficult economic times and insufficient support from advertisers, it ceased publication after its December 2002 issue.

According to Sandra Bailey's "Editor's Letter" in that premier issue, the magazine "focused on the strong, surprising, and courageous women athletes whose exploits thrill and inspire us [the editorial staff]" (p. 8). Aimed at female fans of women's sports who were not necessarily athletes themselves, that first issue of *Women/Sport* did contain short sections on health, exercise, and athletic products. It stands as an important case study of publishing representing upper-middle-class mores and gender roles. In her comparison, Gordy (2003) found that "sports are interpreted more broadly and a wide range of female athleticism is presented in *Sports Illustrated for Women*. However in *Sports Illustrated*, sports is interpreted more hierarchically, sports coverage is generally limited to the three major male

professional sports (baseball, basketball, and football) and female athletes are included in very limited sports roles.”

The arrival of a magazine dedicated solely to the world of women’s sports was an exciting prospect for fans and proponents of women’s sports, including myself. But that first issue of *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport* disappointed many who considered it did not put women’s sports in the best possible light, who were worried and disappointed that its editors did not print the best stories or even focus on the most deserving athletes. So, I decided to investigate further, using feminist theory and prior research findings to better understand the magazine’s messages. Through a critical analysis of the magazine’s editorial content—at the same time recognizing its advertisement, an aspect worthy of study—I hope to demonstrate how the first issue of *Women/Sport* marginalized women’s sports, expressed ambivalence about women’s participation in sports, and perpetuated homophobic and heterosexist attitudes (Caudwell, 2006; Coakley, 1994; Griffin, 1993; Coakley, 1994).

## THEORY AND LITERATURE

Sports feminism is a category of scholarship within the field of sport sociology involving a feminist theoretical (and sometimes methodological) approach to the study of sports. This literature asserts that organized sports have perpetuated patriarchal ideology in Western culture by naturalizing men’s power and privilege over women (e.g., Daddario, 1994; Bryson, 1987; Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988; Messner, 1988; Kane and Snyder, 1989; Birrell and Cole, 1990; Duncan, 1990; Kane and Parks, 1992; Kane and Greendorfer, 1994). Judith DiIorio (1989: 51) explains, “The definitions and ideals traditionally associated with athletics emphasize strength, aggression, competition, and winning and are virtually synonymous with masculinity but antonymous with femininity.”

The strong cultural association between sport and masculinity has resulted in women and girls being discouraged from participating in sports and in discrimination against those who do participate. Much of this discrimination is homophobic in nature (Aitchison, 2006; Cahn, 1993/1996; Harry, 1995; Blinde and Taub, 1992a, 1992b). Betty Hicks (1994: 59) reports that “women athletes are perpetual targets of homophobic attack, most of it from straight males.” For example, Griffin (1993: 193) describes a women’s college basketball game at which, in the silent anticipation of a free-throw shot, a young man yelled out, “You’re all dykes!”

When the mass media present or report on sporting events, they reflect, reproduce, and perpetuate dominant ideologies associated with sports (Williams,

Lawrence and Rowe, 1985; Wenner, 1989; Sabo and Jansen, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Creedon, 1994). Reflecting Western culture's resistance to women's involvement in sports, the mass media have been found to trivialize, marginalize, infantilize, and sexualize female athletes (e.g., Graydon, 1983; Bryson, 1987; Klein, 1988; Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988; Duncan, 1990; Messner, Duncan, and Jensen, 1993; Halbert and Latimer, 1994; Daddario, 1994).

As girls and women's involvement in sports has gradually become more socially acceptable, several researchers have documented a more subtle form of resistance in sports reports: ambivalence (e.g., Duncan, 1986; Hilliard, 1984). Duncan and Hasbrook (1988: 1) explain that "ambivalence consists of conflicting messages about female athletes; positive portrayals of sportswomen are combined with subtly negative suggestions that trivialize or undercut the women's efforts." For example, Duncan (1986: 71) identified a profound ambivalence in magazine and newspaper coverage of female athletes in the 1976 and 1984 Olympics: "Writers veered wildly between describing women athletes as powerful, precise, courageous, skillful, purposeful, and in control—and as cute, vulnerable, juvenile, manipulating, and toy- or animal-like." Kane and Greendorfer (1994: 39) suggest that ambivalence in media portrayals of women's sports serves another "equally important function—that of allowing those in power to acknowledge (and, therefore, to accommodate) the social changes that have taken place within the last two decades while simultaneously offering resistance through the maintenance of the status quo."

## FINDINGS

Three themes emerged from the editorial content of the magazine: (1) Ambivalence toward women and girls' involvement in sport, (2) Heterosexism (including a bias toward heterosexuality and an assumption that all readers were heterosexual), and (3) Homophobia. These themes are interrelated, as the heterosexist and homophobic messages are *part* of the ambivalence expressed in the magazine—beginning with the front cover.

On the cover of the first issue of *Women/Sport* is a full-page photo of Sheryl Swoopes, one of the better known and, therefore, more recognizable female basketball players in the United States at the time. Swoopes, an African American, was a college star in the early 1990s and a member of the gold medal-winning U.S. Olympic team in Atlanta in 1996. The picture was taken in a studio; so, notably, it is not an action shot. Shown in profile, wearing a basketball jersey, she is unmistakably pregnant. In the palm of her left hand is a basketball, upon which the words "Premier Issue" are superimposed. Her right hand rests on top of her

protruding belly in a classic maternal pose. She wears many insignia of femininity, including makeup, earrings, and long fingernails, a wedding and engagement ring set, and a pinkie ring. In inch-high letters, the headline reads, “A star is born,” and under this, in smaller type, is written, “Sheryl Swoopes and the WNBA are due in June.”

Ambivalence toward women’s involvement in sports is expressed through the selection of this photo for the first cover. While vaguely celebrating the creation of the WNBA (Women’s National Basketball Association), a professional league for women, it depicts a player who would not be participating in its launch—as although Swoopes had signed a contract with the Houston Comets, she would miss at least two months of the season.

In an article promoting *Women/Sport* to readers of *Sports Illustrated*, Donald Elliman (1997: 5) wrote that the new magazine was “our response to both the explosive growth of female participation in sports since the passage of Title IX 25 years ago . . . and to the burgeoning popularity of women’s sports among fans.” If this were really true, why didn’t the magazine showcase one of the many other popular basketball players who *would* be playing in the WNBA when the season began? According to Elliman, when *Women/Sport* editor Sandra Bailey learned that Swoopes was pregnant, she was “delighted.” He quoted her as saying, “That settled the issue of who would be on the cover. Here was an athlete about to make her debut in a new pro league, the WNBA. Pregnancy changes everything for her. You couldn’t ask for a better symbol of the differences between men and women.”

Bailey’s interest in placing a symbol of the gender difference on the cover is another indication of the ambivalence toward women in sport. Duncan (1990) argues that any emphasis on sexual difference in sports media serves to undermine and trivialize the efforts of female athletes. Her editorial desire to accentuate the differences between men and women—and using reproductive capabilities and responsibilities to do so—can be interpreted as an effort to “feminize” women’s sports. By putting a pregnant athlete on the cover of the first issue, Bailey and her staff wanted to demonstrate that female athletes are womanly, feminine, vulnerable, dependent, and heterosexual. The message is that these athletes don’t deviate from the traditional roles and behaviors prescribed for women. Placing Swoopes’s diamond wedding ring in clear view further enhances this image of “normal,” heterosexual women.

Much more than highlighting the differences between men and women, this picture symbolizes the differences between the image of female athletes the magazine staff *wants to portray* and the image they fear many potential readers *already have* of female athletes (that they are unfeminine and not heterosexual). However, in emphasizing sexual difference and femininity, the cover photo also

“de-athleticizes” Swoopes, undermining her prodigious athletic skills and talent and denying her the power and respect she has earned through her athletic accomplishments. Although we may know Swoopes for her athletic achievements, we are now to admire her for her beauty and femininity as she takes on a more traditional female role. This photo choice is exemplary of the ambivalence discussed by Kane and Greendorfer (1994), wherein those in power (e.g., the top managers at Time Inc. and *Sports Illustrated*) simultaneously accommodate (through the launch of a women’s sports magazine) and resist (through photo and word choices) women’s changing roles in our society.

Further ambivalence can be detected in the text of the cover lines, the blurbs on the cover that are designed to catch readers’ attention and interest. Some are pertinent to women’s sports and seem to take the subject seriously, such as “Pumping Iron with Anna Quindlen” and “Plus Tonya and Nancy, Martina Hingis, Picabo Street and more.” The other two cover lines serve to undermine women’s involvement in sports. The first, “The Coach as Sexual Predator: Are Young Girls Safe?”, is frightening enough to scare any parent of an athletic daughter. To present the issue in such sensationalistic terms is contrary to the alleged mission of the publication and could be read even as a serious argument against girls’ participation in sports. This cover line is also ambiguous about the sex of the “predatory” coach. Lesbians have often been stereotyped as sexual predators (Griffin, 1993). If a potential reader were to interpret this cover line as a reference to lesbian coaches, the message from the magazine could be thus stated: “We’re not homosexual, we’re not in support of homosexuals, and we don’t want to be associated with homosexuals. We are your watchdog against lesbians ruining the good, clean, heterosexual fun of sport.” In fact, the cover line is misleading. The story is not about a general problem of sexually abusive coaches; instead, it is about one man who ran a volleyball club for high-school-aged girls and had been accused of rape and other forms of sexual abuse by several former club members.

The second cover line that serves to undermine the seriousness and athleticism of women in sports and which accentuates heterosexuality reads, “Why I fell for Grant Hill,” and, in smaller letters, “by E. Jean Carroll.” Grant Hill was a young standout in the National Basketball Association at the time; yet, in a magazine about *women’s* sports, an article about a male sports star seems out of place. The editors might argue that this article is important to the publication because it provides a woman’s perspective on male sports stars. A woman’s perspective on male athletes might well be of interest to female fans of women’s sports, but this article is framed in heterosexual romantic terms that trivialize women’s interest in sports, as if women’s *only* interest in sports is checking out the good-looking guys who play. Women who are fans of men’s sports have been fighting this stereotype for years.

Moving to the pages inside the magazine, one can detect ambivalence toward women's participation in sports in the widely divergent articles offered. Some articles in the issue truly celebrate women's achievements in sports, such as "The New Pioneers" (pp. 136–147), which offers pictures and brief profiles of six "trail-blazers" in women's sports, and "No Girls Allowed" (pp. 120–124, 125, 128), a profile of a female jockey. Other articles, however, marginalize female athletes and/or trivialize women's sports.

One marginalizing article featured ice skater Tonya Harding, heralding her return to ice skating (after being banned from the sport) with the headline "She's Back!" (pp. 80–81). In fact, she was not back. According to the article by Stephanie Mansfield, the only thing Harding had done toward resuming her career was to skate for two minutes in a promotional event prior to the start of a minor-league hockey game. Thus, the facts of the story contradict the headline. Furthermore, the headline, which hints at a positive connotation to Harding's return, also conflicts with the photographs used in the article, all of which show her in very unflattering light. The one that appears to be shot with a purple filter over the camera lens gives her skin a greenish hue and her blonde hair a purple tinge. Six other pictures of Harding show her in harsh bright light, which washes out her pale skin color and accentuates her sharp features. One can see a stark difference between these picture and others in the magazine, which are much more flattering to their subjects. The message conveyed is that Harding is unattractive and thus worthy of scorn.

Furthermore, although the article is not entirely unsympathetic to Harding's situation (it tells of the physical abuse she suffered while married to her ex-husband and details the penalties she paid for her part in the assault on rival skater Nancy Kerrigan), it contains numerous scathing put-downs and derogatory allusions to her social class, which again serve to undermine her credibility as a member of the women's sports community. Take the following, for instance: "When the gods blessed Harding with a fireplug of a body that could leap high and twirl fast, it was a cruel punishment. Spinning out of control off the ice, she was a gal with a million-dollar butt and a 10-cent brain" (Mansfield, 1997: 84). The author takes every opportunity to point out signs of Harding's working-class lifestyle (e.g., "a pack-a-day habit," "her talon like fake nails," and "the windshield wipers are worn thin"), describing a friend of Harding's as a "platinum-haired, heavysset 51-year-old woman" and her current boyfriend as "a workingman in a baseball cap."

Ambivalence is also evident in the presentation of the two articles, both intended to be humorous, that were written in the first person by female journalists about their experiences interviewing male professional athletes. In one, "The Phallic Fallacy" (pp. 35, 38), veteran sportswriter Jane Leavy says that she has no

sexual interest in male athletes because “they sweat. They smell. They scratch” (p. 35)—not because she is gay or even because she is a professional.

“The Phallic Fallacy” is caustic and anti-male, but lest someone interpret this as lesbianism, Leavy makes it clear that she is heterosexual: “The guys aren’t that attractive. Muscle definition is one thing. Going to bed with Mount Rushmore is quite another. Did somebody say rock slide?” (p. 35). It’s not that she doesn’t like men; she just doesn’t like *these* men, she implies. This disclaimer is in a sense her loyalty oath to the heterosexuals in the readership. It expresses the magazine’s heterosexism and assuages the homophobia the staff expects from the readers. She goes on to challenge the perceptions held by male athletes about female sportswriters (that the women secretly want to have sex with them) and the unspoken newsroom mandate that female sportswriters make their gender invisible in their writing. But she leaves unchallenged the gender hierarchy from which these perceptions and expectations emerge and mistakenly equates women’s gender with femininity, as if the terms were interchangeable:

Women in the locker room see things differently—and I don’t mean anatomically. We come to sports with different assumptions and experiences. We are outsiders, which is what reporters are supposed to be. The femininity we sought to hide is actually our greatest asset, our X-ray vision. (p. 38)

In “The Bad Boy Diary” (teased on the cover as “Why I fell for Grant Hill”), E. Jean Carroll lusts after every man who walks by her as she waits for an interview in the Chicago Bulls locker room. Much here, too, could be characterized as overtly heterosexual male bashing. Heterosexual desire runs rampant; in fact, the self-absorbed narrator contradicts Jane Leavy’s claim that female sportswriters do not enter men’s locker rooms to admire men’s bodies sexually. As she waits for the subject of her interview, she writes in her diary,

There’s Steve Kerr in his boxer shorts! Lord amighty! What a sight! I’m so close I can smell the laundry additives! Egads! Geez, Louise! I’m in the—*I mmmmm*—I’m in the Chicago Bulls’ locker room after a win against the Milwaukee Bucs and *oooww!* Luc Longley just loped past in a wet towel! Holy Moly! Heaven’s to Betsy! I must *saavaa* . . . I must say the Chicago Bulls’ locker room is the most exciting place I’ve ever been. (p. 150)

Carroll’s narrative is framed along the familiar lines of a heterosexual romance involving a “bad boy” and a “nice guy,” and the heroine must choose one. At first Mr. Nice Guy (Grant Hill) bores her silly, then the Bad Boy (Dennis Rodman) keeps her waiting by the phone and eventually stands her up (for an interview), so she finally chooses Nice Guy Hill as her favorite. She ends the piece with, “The

Bad Boys never call, never write and always come to pick you up after you've left, and you know what I say, Dear Diary? I say to hell with them" (p. 154). Although she makes this and other disparaging remarks about men in general and about the two basketball stars in particular, there is never any doubt that this is a heterosexual "romance."

Other "proofs" of heterosexuality appear in the form of photographs. Sheryl Swoopes was pictured with her husband, as were jockey Julie Krone and Rutgers University women's basketball coach Vivian Stringer (though her husband had died three years earlier). Tonya Harding was shown with her boyfriend, and USA softball player Dot Richardson had a male date in her article "Sex, Lies, and Softball" (pp. 40, 42, 44)—her experiences with "the lesbian label," attached to her simply because she plays sports. Richardson, who does not rush to declare her heterosexuality but implies it as a given (and states it explicitly midway through the article), makes an earnest effort to discuss the issues surrounding homophobia in women's sports and to confess her own early prejudices and growth in understanding and accepting lesbian teammates. However, she refers to homosexuality as a "choice" and as a "sexual view," indicating that she is still not well informed about the biological nature of sexual orientation.

This attempt to deal with the issue of homophobia and the widespread use of the lesbian label to discourage girls and women from playing sports is laudable, but the article as a whole exudes a smugness of heterosexual privilege. Are we to congratulate Richardson for overcoming her prejudices? Where are the real victims' stories? A bold magazine that was unafraid of losing homophobic readers—that was not, in fact, *pandering* to homophobic readers—should allow lesbian athletes to speak for themselves about the homophobia that surrounds women's sports. Ambivalence and distancing can also be read from the fact that the editors used a well-known athlete, rather than a staff member, to write about homosexuality and homophobia in women's sports.

A final example of both ambivalence toward women in sports and heterosexist assumptions about what women want to gain from their sporting experiences appears in the concluding paragraphs of the article on Sheryl Swoopes. Earlier in the article, which is actually about several of the women from the USA basketball team, author Alexander Wolff reveals that Swoopes had not seen her father since she was three months old and would like to see him again. He quotes her:

I don't want him in my life. He hasn't been for 26 years. But it's a personal goal of mine to meet him, something I've wanted for as long as I can remember. If I were to see him, I don't know if I'd break down or what. But if he has his eyesight and can still hear, I guess he's read or heard about me.

Part of me will be very glad to meet him. And part of me will be very angry. The only question I'd have for him is, after everything I've done—especially the

Olympics—why hasn't he called or written? Why hasn't he at least said that I exist? (p. 58)

The article breaks off there, leaving Swoopes' heart-wrenching questions hanging unanswered and moves into profiles of four of her Olympic teammates before returning to Swoopes. The second segment of her profile discusses her pregnancy and her plans regarding her professional basketball career. (This piece appears to have been written later than the others, after Swoopes announced her pregnancy.) In the concluding paragraphs, Wolff offers an anecdote to illustrate his claim that Swoopes and her former teammates "have been unerringly good" (p. 62) at making choices:

There was a guy back at Brownfield High, pre-Eric [her husband], whom Sheryl was sweet on, and one day she found herself facing him in a game of one-on-one. Do I play hard and beat him? she wondered, or give him a few so he'll like me? She debated only an instant. "Forget that, I said to myself. And I beat him." A short time later he asked her out.

Wolff's evidence that Swoopes made the right choice seems to be the fact that the young man asked her out. Thus, the article tells us that the reward for a woman's good choice is the attention of a man—not meeting the challenge of a tough opponent or being true to your own abilities, both of which have traditionally been considered rewards of playing sports.

From this anecdote Wolff draws the following connection: "Perhaps there is a lesson in that, a lesson worth reiterating as Swoopes's search for her father takes on another dimension—as it becomes a search for her child's grandfather. Play the game, play it hard, and eventually a man will notice" (Ibid.). This "lesson" reiterates, this time explicitly, the idea expressed in the anecdote, that the primary reward female athletes can hope to gain from their athletic endeavors is not confidence, strength, fulfillment, good health, or even fame and fortune, but the notice of a man. This sexist and heterosexist assumption completely overlooks the intrinsic rewards of sports participation. It works to both accommodate and resist women's movement into sport by framing women's athletic endeavors as heterosexually driven efforts to win men's approval and thus remain within the patriarchal parameters of women's gender role.

## CONCLUSIONS

As Kane and Snyder (1989: 90) argued almost ten years before the introduction of *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport*, "Due to historical change evidenced by the

Women's Movement and Title IX, we are in a state of 'social flux' with respect to women's involvement in sport." They did not argue that the gender hierarchy had been disrupted entirely, but that "exclusive domination by males in sport has been challenged" (Ibid.). It seems safe to say that we are still in a state of flux with respect to social acceptance of women in sport. The messages of ambivalence, heterosexism, and homophobia in the premier issue of *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport* are a reflection of the confused and conflicted attitudes surrounding women's sports in our culture.

If this is the case, does this critique unfairly shoot the messenger? I think not. Because of the broad sphere of influence enjoyed by the mass media (especially a magazine owned by Time, Inc., with a 730,000-copy initial print run, most of which was given away for free), the creators of mass-media content have a responsibility to challenge—or, at the very least, *not* reproduce and perpetuate—harmful prejudices and stereotypes. The messenger in this case is playing into homophobic fears and prejudices and perpetuating traditional gender roles that restrict women's involvement and achievement in sports. The creators of this magazine need to be called on it.

By way of postscript, I was pleased to find this blog by Megan Hueter (2008) on [www.heractivelife](http://www.heractivelife), bemoaning how, as an avid reader of *Sports Illustrated for Women* when she was younger, she read this editorial explanation of its demise: "These are tough times for a new magazine, and sometimes even loyal readers aren't enough to make the numbers add up." She simply wouldn't buy that argument, never mind the one that "women are more interested in sports as participants than fans, unlike men," or that "women's interest is 'fragmented' across a wide variety of sports (such as soccer, tennis or running), with little to bind them as a shared audience." Instead, Hueter thinks that "it's our cultural values that prevent magazines and publications (as well as some women's sports) to receive the type of attention they deserve. The primary problem: men aren't interested (unless the girls are pretty)."

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