OUT OF THE PICTURE:

GENDER BIAS AND CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROPOSED PICTOGRAMS FOR THE 1996 OLYMPIC GAMES

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THE WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION

The Women's Sports Foundation, established in 1974, is a national, non-profit educational organization that promotes and enhances sports and fitness opportunities for all girls and women. The Foundation provides leadership, educational resources, recognition and advocacy programs and financial support for the purpose of improving the physical, mental and emotional well-being of all females through sports and fitness participation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 1994, the Atlanta Committee for the 1996 Olympic Games (ACOG) introduced the official pictograms for the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. These black-on-white silhouettes of 31 athletic events were said to represent both women and men performers. The Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) received numerous calls expressing concern that the pictograms did not represent both genders, and further, portrayed virtually all male figures. An informal survey of 28 former women Olympians and 28 other national calibre athletes was done and 98% (N = 56) felt the pictures were mostly men. The WSF shared these concerns with ACOG and several artistic revisions were subsequently made in order to ensure that the final pictograms would "be viewed as universal interpretations of the human form."[1]

While appreciating ACOG's effort to universalize its portrayals of athletes, the Foundation remained concerned that most of the proposed pictograms would be seen as manly rather than "human" forms. As a result of this concern, this research study was designed to empirically examine whether children perceive the proposed ACOG pictograms in gendered or "universal interpretations of human" forms. A purposive sample of 779 American third through seventh graders viewed the pictograms for 31 Olympic events and indicated whether the figures were "definitely a man," "definitely a woman," or "either a man or woman." The major findings in the study are:

* 58% of the children judged the 22 coed events to be "either a man or woman";

* When children do not perceive the pictograms as representing "either a man or woman," they are apt to label the figures "definitely a man." For example 29% of the children thought the 22 coed events were "definitely a man."

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[1] Artistic revisions that were made in athletics/track, softball, and basketball included: decreasing bulk in the arms, legs, and waist; narrowing the shoulders; and creating a more pronounced curve at the small of the back and a more of a "v" in the torso. The picture depicting basketball was also revised so that the skill was not a "slam dunk." In addition, three new pictograms were added (rhythmic gymnastics, canoe/kayak sprint and slalom).

* For the six all-male events, 52% of the children thought they were "definitely a man," while 41% perceived them as "either a man or woman," and 7% as "definitely a women." Thus males were included in 93% of the children's responses.

* For the three all-female events, 35% of the children thought they were "definitely a women," but near 19% thought they were "definitely a man."

* When event was all-male, few children (6%) mis-labeled the pictograms as "definitely a woman." However, when the event was all-female, 18.7% of the children mis-labeled the pictogram as "definitely a man."

Policy recommendations were made suggesting that:

1. Olympic pictograms should be rendered more inclusive by either redrawing the figures, or considering including both male and female models for each coed event symbol.

2. Consider alternative icons for the Olympic events which draw attention to the equipment used (kayak, badminton shuttle, etc.) rather than attempting to create "universal" human forms.

INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport have increased markedly in the past twenty years. Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, American girls and women have poured out of the bleachers onto the playing fields in unprecedented numbers. Today, 34% of high school athletes and 33% of college athletes are women and, on the international scene, 39.8% of Olympic athletes in Barcelona were women. In 1994 American women brought home 90 medals among our 219 female competitors, for a 41% yield compared to 25% for their male counterparts (102 medals by 402 competitors) at Barcelona (USOC, 1994). Women's figure skating and gymnastics now capture huge shares of television viewership and women are the most frequent participants in the seven leading fitness activities (National Sporting Goods Association, 1992). Public health officials recognize that exercise reduces women's risk for cancer, heart disease, and osteoporosis. Parents are just as apt to encourage daughters to excel at sports as sons (The Wilson Report, 1988).

Despite these gains and growing public and parental support, research shows that gender biases continue to hold girls and women back from realizing their athletic potential. Gender bias refers to a strong, preconceived opinion about something or someone that is based on their gender. In American culture, key gender biases in sport include the belief that sports are solely or mainly for men, that boys are better at sports than girls, that women athletes are "masculine," and that males deserve more athletic opportunities than females.

Gender bias may be communicated by toys, games, books, television, films, and newspapers. In sport media, for example, bias has been evident in the exclusion and trivialization of women athletes. Duncan and Messner (1994) found that 94% of local television news sports coverage went to men's sports, while newspaper stories on men's sports outnumbered those on women 23 to 1. Broadcasters can trivialize women athletes by giving them less commentary than men athletes, calling them "girls," focusing on physical attractiveness, or presenting images that evoke feminine stereotypes (e.g., pink logos) rather than athleticism (Cohen, 1993; MacNeill, 1994). The strength, determination, and achievements of women athletes get lost amid pervasive portrayals of competent and strong male athletes and fluffy, stereotypical treatments of female athletes.

Children's interest and involvement in sport do not occur randomly or because of biological urges, but rather, they are intricately tied to social learning. Stereotypical messages that sports are mainly "male" pursuits or that men's athletic skills are more highly valued than women's seep into girls' and boys' visions of what is "normal," possible, or desirable for them, influencing their developing identities and choices (Thorne, 1994; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Greendorfer, 1978; 1987; 1993). While gender biases in the past have generally encouraged boys' athletic leanings and ambitions, girls have been comparatively

shortchanged by a lack of cultural recognition and rewards.

PURPOSE, METHOD and PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the pictograms proposed by the Atlanta Committee for the 1996 Olympic Games (ACOG) express gender bias by over-representation of male figures to symbolize athletic events. We hypothesized that, if the proposed pictograms are indeed "human" (i.e., represent either males or females; gender neutral) in content and form, then children would be just as likely to identify the figures as male or female--especially for coed events in which both sexes compete.

Method

Multistage purposive sampling was used to recruit 779 boys and girls enrolled in third through seventh grades in American elementary and middle schools. The schools were located in seven states: California, Colorado, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Oregon, South Dakota, and Virginia. One teacher was contacted in each state, who located one school system that would participate. There was one urban school system, three medium-sized systems (suburban), and three rural school systems.

Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire packet was developed in order to investigate how children perceived the gender of the athletes depicted in the pictograms. Each packet contained the 31 pictograms released by ACOG, one pictogram per page, randomly ordered. A cover page asked for demographic information; i.e., school grade, age, gender, and racial/ethnic background.

Each subject was asked to circle a choice that completed an unfinished statement that appeared below each of pictograms in order to elicit the child's perception of each image. The three response choices were randomly ordered on each of the 31 pictograms throughout all packets:

This person is...
- a. either a man or woman
- b. definitely a man
- c. definitely a woman

Basic descriptive statistics were generated in order to identify patterns and make subgroup comparisons. Statistical tests (chi squares) were used to determine whether significant differences existed between the responses of boys and girls, and children of different ages and grade levels. The results of statistical tests reported are significant at the $p < .05$ level.[2]

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[2] Contact the authors for specific information regarding the research design and statistical analyses.

Procedures

The study was presented to teachers as a learning experience for students to discuss the Olympic Games and sports. Enough packets were mailed to each designated teacher in order to supply every child in one in-tact grade level classroom at the designated school. The questionnaires were administered during a class period by the classroom teacher or physical education teacher. The following standardized instructions were read by teachers to participating students before opening the packets:

> The pictures in this packet represent sports that are popular. We are interested in your impressions of the individuals pictured in each illustration. After you glance at the picture, please indicate your answer to the question at the bottom of the page.

The time required for a child to review all 31 pictograms ranged from 10-15 minutes. Discussion of the pictures and Olympic Games occurred only after all students had completed the questionnaire.

FINDINGS

The children (N = 779) ranged between 7-14 years of age with a median age of 10.50 years. The sample consisted of 372 girls (48%) and 403 boys (52%). Table 1 summarizes the racial/ethnic diversity of the sample as well as the percentages of students across grades.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics for 779 Children in Grades 3-7.

Variable		N	Percentage (%)
Gender:			
	Females	372	48.0
	Males	403	52.0
School Grade:			
	3rd	153	19.6
	4th	171	22.0
	5th	165	21.2
	6th	183	23.5
	7th	107	13.7
Ethnic Background			
	African-American	115	15.1
	Asian	18	2.4
	Hispanic	38	5.0
	European-American	571	77.4

Analyses by Gender Represented at Events

Coed Olympic Events. Twenty-two of the proposed pictograms represent coed Olympic events; i.e., competitions that are held for both men and women. (See Figure 1 for a list of the coed events.) If the proposed pictograms representing coed events were truly gender neutral, one would expect that almost all children would have labeled them "either a man or a woman." This was not the case.

Figure 1 shows that 42% (N = 374) of the children believed only one gender was being represented, while only slightly more than half the children (58%; N = 452) perceived the picture as representing either a man or woman. Among those children who perceived only one gender, 29% (N = 226) perceived them as definitely a man, while 13% (N = 101) identified the figures as definitely a woman.

Coed Events Represented in Pictograms

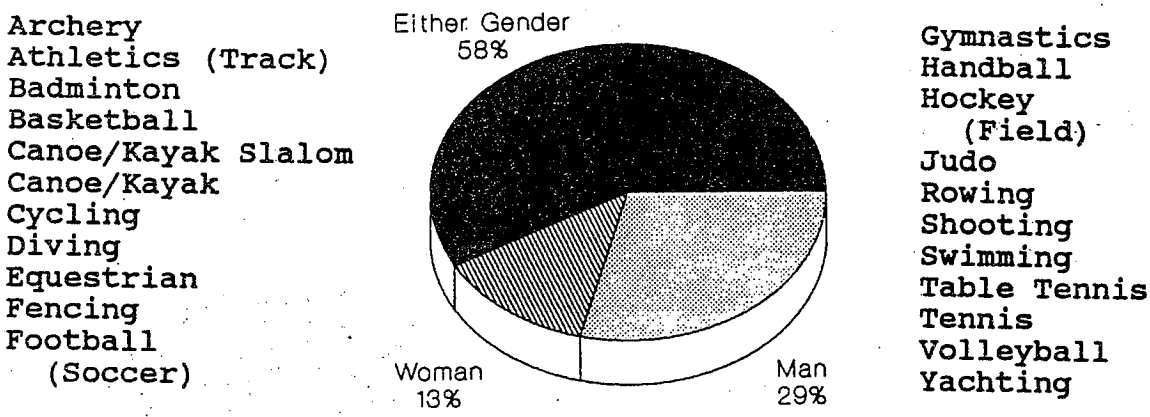

Figure 1. Percentage of Children in Grades 3-7 who identified the Coed Event Pictograms as "Either a Man or Woman", "Definitely a Woman" or "Definitely a Man"

Appendix B contains a breakdown of children's responses for each of the 31 pictograms representing Olympic events. A majority of the children perceived 16 of these figures as "either a man or women;" five of the figures as "definitely a man" (archery, fencing, hockey, judo, and shooting), and only one as "definitely a woman" (gymnastics).

All-Male Events. Six pictograms portrayed Olympic events in which only men compete. Figure 2 lists these events and shows that considerably less than half (41%) of the children (N = 319) perceived these pictograms as being "either a man or a woman," while 52% (N = 405) interpreted the figures as "definitely a man". Only 7% (N = 55) of the children labeled these images "definitely a woman."

All-Male Events Represented in Pictograms

Baseball
Boxing
Modern Pentathlon
Water Polo
Weight Lifting
Wrestling

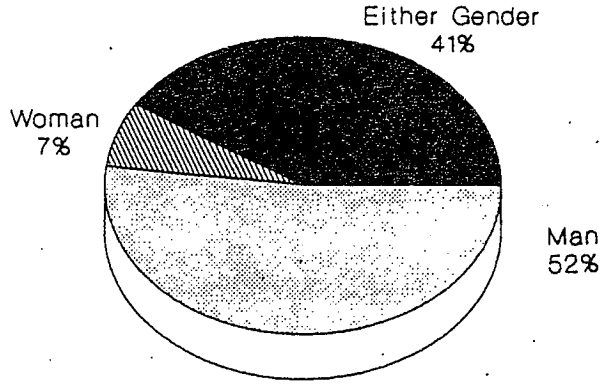

Figure 2. Percentage of Children Grades 3-7 who identified All-Male Events "Definitely a Man", "Either a Man or Woman", or "Definitely a Woman."

All-Female Events. Three pictograms represented Olympic events in which only women compete and are represented in Figure 3. While more than a third (35%, N = 273) perceived the figures as "definitely a woman," 19% (N = 148) held that they were "definitely a man." Forty-six percent (N = 366) labeled the figures "either a man or a woman."

All-Female Events Represented in Pictograms

Rhythmic Gymnastics
Softball
Synchronized Swimming

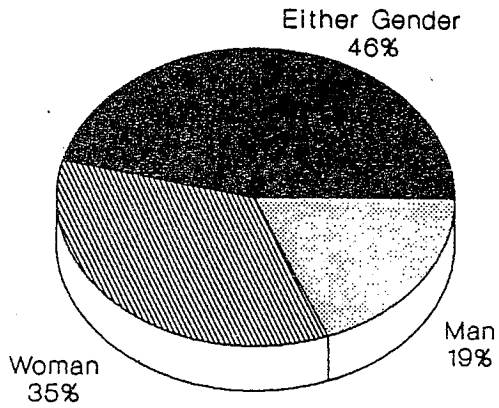

Figure 3. Percentage of children grades 3-7 who identified all-female events as "Definitely a Woman", "Either a Man or Woman", or "Definitely a Man."

Analysis by Gender of Respondent

The researchers wanted to know if girls would more often identify pictograms as female figures while boys would be prone to perceive male figures. Table 3 summarizes the perceptions of boys and girls for all 31 events and three subsets: coed events, all-male events and all-female events.

Table 3

Summary Table of Percentages of Boys and Girls who Perceived each Pictogram as "Either a Man or Woman", "Definitely a Man" or "Definitely a Woman."

Reviewed Pictograms	Percentage of Children Total (779)	Girls (372)	Boys (403)
All 31 Events:			
Either a Man or Woman	53.22	55.39	50.43
Definitely a Man	32.77	30.51	35.88
Definitely a Woman	14.01	14.10	13.69
The 22 Coed Events:			
Either a Man or Woman	57.98	58.03	54.72
Definitely a Man	29.10	28.50	32.27
Definitely a Woman	12.92	13.47	13.01
The 6 All-Male Events:			
Either a Man or Woman	40.94	45.13	37.04
Definitely a Man	52.48	48.14	56.58
Definitely a Woman	6.58	6.73	6.38
The 3 All-Female Events:			
Either a Man or Woman	46.59	47.42	45.76
Definitely a Man	18.66	16.23	20.91
Definitely a Woman	34.75	36.35	33.33

Though the perceptions of boys compared to girls were not significantly different, it is interesting to note that when events were all-male, few children perceived the pictograms as female (6.6 %). However, when events were all-female, 18.7% perceived the pictograms as "definitely a man". This pattern was true for both girls and boys (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 summarized the variation in children's perceptions of the gender of pictogram figures across all-male, all-female, and coed Olympic events. Several observations can be made.

1. The fact that the children's perceptions of the gender of pictograms significantly varied belies the claim that the pictograms portray gender-neutral athletes.

2. For the all-male events and coed events, when children did not perceive the pictograms as representing "either a man or woman," they were apt to label the figures as "definitely a man" (52% and 29% respectively).

3. For all-female Olympic events, though 35% of the

children perceived the figures as "definitely a woman," still 19% labeled the figures "definitely a man."

Children's Perceptions of Gender by Category of Olympic Event

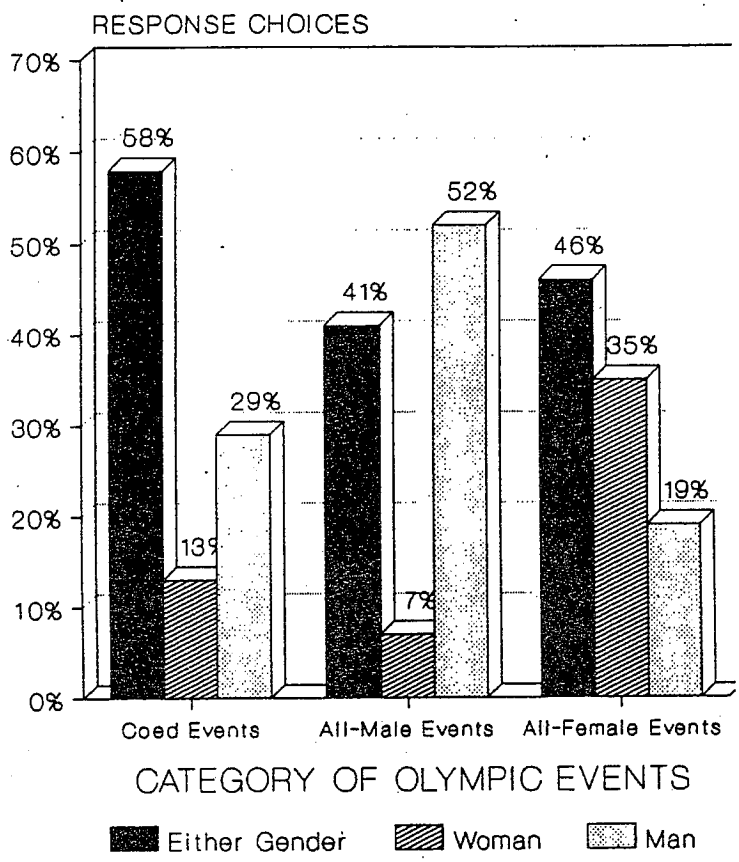

Figure 4. **Percent of children who identified pictograms as "Definitely a Man", "Definitely a Woman", or "Either a Man or a Woman."**

DISCUSSION

The interpretation of the above findings hinges on the extent to which the proposed pictograms avoid gender bias and achieve an artistic rendering of universal, human form. The data gathered in this study do not support a claim to universality.

We understand that perception is a dynamic process. Children bring previously learned expectations to bear on interpreting what enters their visual fields. In making sense out of the pictograms, it is likely that a number of pre-existing expectations about sport and gender influenced their interpretations of the pictograms. It may be that some children assumed that badminton and softball are for girls and women while such activities as judo and shooting are for boys and men.

At the same time, however, the visual content of images may convey information about gender differences or evoke stereotypical expectations in children's minds. In American culture, for example, a clenched fist and exaggerated upper body commonly symbolize masculinity, whereas a downturned, extended hand with outstretched fingers and a more ample lower body are considered emblematic of femininity (Messner & Sabo, 1995). Such culturally specific visual cues, therefore, can act as triggers or cues that shape children's perceptions.

If the coed pictograms are to depict events which are available for both men and women, then it would be expected that most children would view them that way. In fact, 11 of the 22 coed pictograms were viewed by more than 25% of the children (both boys and girls) as being "definitely a man." In addition, one female only event (softball) was also viewed as "definitely a man" by 46% of the children (see Appendix B).

The fact that so many of the children in this study interpreted the purportedly universal figures as "definitely a man," particularly in coed events where both sexes compete in real life, strongly suggests that the proposed pictograms are culturally biased. We infer, therefore, that the pictograms will foster the development of stereotypical beliefs in children that sports are more appropriate for men and boys than women and girls.

CONCLUSION

The results strongly suggest that the proposed pictograms fall short of representing universal human forms. To the extent that women athletes are being left out of the picture by the ACOG pictogram program, they are being symbolically reduced to second-class citizens in Olympic sports. The gender biases built into the ACOG pictograms will inflate the visual presence of male athletes and deflate the significance of women athletes. Should ACOG proceed with the current pictograms, the multimillion dollar promotion and coverage of the upcoming Centennial Olympic Games will be tainted by the specter of gender stereotyping.

It would be regrettable if the pictogram program perpetuates gender bias by introducing it into the promotion of the Olympic Games at a time when cultural assumptions about women's athletic abilities have become so positive and encouraging. Thirty years ago, for example, it was assumed that women did not possess the stamina to run a marathon. After two decades of lobbying, the women's marathon event was included in the 1984 Olympic Games and Joan Benoit, an American, won the gold medal. American women Olympians yield far more medals (41% of participants) compared to their male counterparts (25%) (USOC, 1994). Today, unprecedented numbers of girls and women are doing and dreaming athletics. Boys and men have begun to cheer them on and admire their accomplishments. To the extent that the ACOG pictogram program leaves women out of the picture, women's deeds and dreams will be

dampened and men's perceptions of their ability will be distorted.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to help interpret these data, and their implications a group of nationally recognized leaders from government, education, and sport were invited to participate on a Policy Recommendations Advisory Board. Members reviewed the findings and conclusions of this study and endorse the following policy guidelines.

1. Olympic pictograms should be rendered more inclusive by either redrawing the figures, or considering including both male and female models for each coed event symbol.

2. Consider alternative icons for the Olympic events which draw attention to the equipment used (kayak, badminton shuttle, etc.) rather than attempting to create "universal" human forms.

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APPENDIX A

CATEGORIES OF

ACOG PICTOGRAMS

Coed Events	All-Male Events	All-Female Events
1. archery	1. baseball	1. rhythmic gymnastics
2. athletics	2. boxing	2. softball
3. badminton	3. modern pentathlon	3. synchronized swimming
4. basketball	4. water polo	
5. canoe/kayak sprint	5. weight lifting	
6. canoe/kayak slalom	6. wrestling	
7. cycling		
8. diving		
9. equestrian		
10. fencing		
11. football (soccer)		
12. gymnastics		
13. handball (team)		
14. hockey (field)		
15. judo		
16. rowing		
17. shooting		
18. swimming		
19. table tennis		
20. tennis		
21. volleyball		
22. yachting		

APPENDIX B

Percentages of Responses

by Child Gender for

ALL 31 PICTOGRAMS

Sport	Total N			Girls			Boys		
	M-W	W	M*	M-W	W	M	M-W	W	M
Archery	44.7	7.1	48.1	42.0	7.1	51.0	47.5	7.3	45.3
Athletics (Track)	67.3	12.3	20.5	72.7	13.1	14.2	62.5	11.6	25.9
Badminton	69.0	10.0	21.0	71.5	8.1	20.3	66.8	11.9	21.3
Basketball	60.5	9.9	29.6	67.2	12.0	20.8	53.6	7.9	37.0
Baseball[M]	43.2	4.0	52.7	46.6	4.7	48.8	40.1	3.5	56.4
Boxing[M]	14.0	3.9	82.1	15.9	2.7	81.4	12.0	4.8	83.2
Canoe/Kayak Slm.	58.7	6.4	34.9	60.9	3.8	35.3	57.1	8.3	34.6
Canoe/Kayak	60.3	5.3	34.4	63.0	5.1	31.9	57.8	5.5	36.7
Cycling	69.5	7.2	23.3	74.2	8.7	17.1	65.4	5.8	28.8
Diving	55.6	36.4	8.1	55.0	40.4	4.6	61.6	15.9	22.5
Equestrian	66.0	14.2	19.8	70.8	12.3	16.9	60.5	15.6	22.1
Fencing	32.6	3.4	64.1	27.5	3.0	69.5	37.0	3.5	59.4
Football (Soccer)	58.0	5.2	36.8	64.3	6.5	29.2	52.3	4.0	43.7
Gymnastics	27.5	68.8	3.7	27.1	71.0	1.9	27.4	67.3	5.3
Handball (Team)	60.6	13.4	26.0	65.0	12.5	22.5	55.3	13.9	29.0
Hockey (Field)	42.9	9.9	47.2	50.7	8.7	40.7	35.9	10.9	53.3
Judo	44.3	3.3	52.4	43.6	2.5	54.0	45.2	4.0	50.8
Modern 5-athlon[M]	65.1	18.5	16.4	67.5	19.7	12.8	63.1	17.3	19.6
Rythm. Gymn.[F]	18.4	77.2	4.4	16.5	81.0	2.4	20.1	73.6	6.3

APPENDIX B (Continued)

Percentages of Responses

by Child Gender for

ALL 31 PICTOGRAMS

Sport	Total N			Girls			Boys		
	G.N.	W	M	G.N.	W	M	G.N.	W	M
Rowing	61.4	6.8	31.9	65.8	7.4	26.8	37.6	6.3	36.1
Shooting	35.1	4.4	60.3	34.6	4.9	60.5	36.3	4.0	59.7
Softball[F]	45.8	8.0	46.3	49.2	7.0	42.2	41.8	8.6	49.6
Swimming	70.1	13.0	16.9	71.5	12.7	15.7	68.9	13.4	17.1
Synchr. Swim[F]	75.7	18.9	5.5	75.0	20.4	3.5	75.6	17.4	7.1
Table Tennis	71.8	11.0	17.2	73.0	10.8	16.2	70.7	11.2	18.1
Tennis	71.1	12.8	16.1	71.8	11.8	15.1	69.8	13.8	16.5
Volleyball	65.7	21.3	13.0	69.2	21.3	9.5	62.6	21.0	16.4
Yachting	54.9	4.9	37.2	59.9	4.0	34.1	54.9	3.5	39.6
Water Polo[M]	57.0	5.7	37.2	63.4	4.6	32.0	51.3	6.6	42.2
Weight Lifting[M]	29.9	3.2	66.8	36.3	4.1	59.6	23.8	2.5	73.7
Wrestling[M]	36.8	4.2	59.0	40.3	4.6	52.4	32.4	3.8	63.8

* Note. M-W = "either a man or woman," W = "definitely a woman," M = "definitely a man," [M] = All-Male Events, [F] = All-Female Events.

SPORTS PICTOGRAMS

APPENDIX C


ARCHERY


ATHLETICS


BADMINTON


BASEBALL


BASKETBALL


BOXING


CANOE / KAYAK


CYCLING


DIVING


EQUESTRIAN


FENCING


FOOTBALL


GYMNASTICS


HANDBALL


HOCKEY


JUDO


SHOOTING


SOFTBALL


MODERN PENTATHLON


ROWING


SWIMMING


SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING


TABLE TENNIS

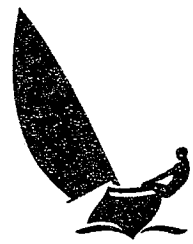

TENNIS


VOLLEYBALL


WATER POLO


WEIGHTLIFTING

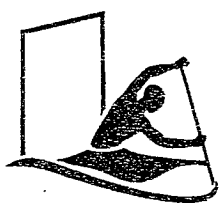

WRESTLING


YACHTING

REVISED/NEW SPORTS PICTOGRAMS


ATHLETICS


BASKETBALL


CANOE/KAYAK SLALOM


CANOE/KAYAK SPRINT


RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS


SOFTBALL

For more information please contact:

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