

## MEDIA – IMAGES AND WORDS IN WOMEN'S SPORTS

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In 1994, the Women's Sports Foundation issued "Words to Watch," guidelines for treating male and female athletes equally in sports reporting and commentary. This publication was developed in response to a number of events in which media were criticized for sexist comments made during network broadcasts or in newspaper and magazine coverage of women's sports. The guidelines were distributed to electronic and print media on the Foundation's media list and by request. "Words to Watch" was adapted with permission of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sports, 1994. Section II of this publication remains as "Words to Watch."

In response to numerous questions and criticisms of the visual and narrative portrayal of female athletes on television and female athlete imagery appearing in print media, the Foundation has expanded its "Words to Watch" publication to incorporate imagery and to raise pertinent issues related to authentic and realistic reporting about and depiction of girls and women in sports and fitness. "Images to Watch" was added to this publication in October of 1995 and the main title revised accordingly (see Section I of this publication).

This publication also includes a new section written specifically for female athletes who are asked to participate in electronic and print media advertising or other projects. This section (see Section III) was designed to educate athletes about their rights as models and to provide ethics guidelines for decision-making related to their participation in advertising and other visual and written programming regarding how they are portrayed. These guidelines were reviewed by over 50 of the nation's most highly visible champion female athletes.

Also new to the publication is a section on "Most Often Asked Questions About Media Coverage of Women in Sports." The Foundation answers approximately 100,000 inquiries a year on women's sports. These questions range from, "I've just moved to Kansas City. How do I find a youth soccer team for my daughter?" to media questions like, "What is wrong with wanting to portray women as feminine and physically attractive?" Section IV contains the answers to the questions most often asked of the Foundation about media coverage of women's sports.

## **IMAGES: TREATING FEMALE AND MALE ATHLETES EQUALLY IN SPORT REPORTING, COMMENTARY, PUBLIC RELATIONS, MARKETING, AND ADVERTISING**

Our culture has undergone dramatic changes in the past 25 years with regard to recognition of inappropriate gender stereotyping. Yet the advertising industry in particular has been slow to reflect these changes. Images of women in general are still unrealistically thin and “twiggy” or reflective of sexual connotations. Female athletes are often portrayed by models as women without muscles or sports skill. Athlete and nonathlete models are portrayed in sexually provocative or non-athletic poses instead of moving or posing as authentic athletically skilled performers.

At a time when society is extremely critical of words and images that are disrespectful to women, media companies and corporations using images of active women in their electronic and print advertising, are in need of guidelines that will keep them from making errors that carry significant public relations liabilities and possibly, economic liabilities with female consumers.

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN REVIEWING IMAGES:**

#### **1. DOES THE WOMAN LOOK LIKE AN ATHLETE?**

She should not appear uncoordinated or incompetent. Women are more likely than men to be pictured failing at their sport (e.g., dropping the ball). If it's an action shot, she should be doing something athletes do well.

#### **2. IS SHE DRESSED LIKE AN ATHLETE?**

Her clothing or uniform and equipment should look authentic.

#### **3. DOES SHE HAVE ALL OF HER APPROPRIATE CLOTHES ON?**

She should not be dressing or undressing.

#### **4. ARE ANY SIGNIFICANT BODY PARTS MISSING?**

Women often appear with no heads, which implies that only their bodies or parts of their bodies (such as breasts and buttocks) matter. It is permissible for an individual body part to be featured if the product is specific to that body part and the image is not sexual.

#### **5. IS HER POSE OR ARE HER MOVEMENTS REALISTIC?**

If Michael Jordan were posed with this body in this position, would he look ridiculous? The athlete should not appear dainty, submissive, shy, or seductive; she should not be in a pose that is contorted, upside-down, or unauthentic (i.e., lifting weights and smiling; sitting with her legs crossed and twisted into a pretzel). She should not be pouting seductively. She should not be gazing adoringly toward men (neither the men pictured in the ad nor male consumers viewing the ad.)

#### **6. DO THE WORDS AND PICTURES GO TOGETHER?**

Words often undermine the image. For example, “strong is sexy” or “the beauty of power.”

#### **7. DOES THE ATHLETE LOOK HER AGE?**

Women should not be infantilized, and girls should not be put in adult roles. When depicting women participating in sports in recreational settings, there should be diversity in the age of participants.

#### **8. IS THE IMAGE SOMETHING ANY GIRL COULD LOOK AT AND FEEL PROUD OF AS A CURRENT OR FUTURE ATHLETE?**

#### **9. WOULD YOU BE COMFORTABLE IF THE GIRL OR WOMAN IN THE ADVERTISEMENT WAS YOUR DAUGHTER, MOM OR A FEMALE FRIEND?**

#### **10. IS THERE DIVERSITY WITH REGARD TO RACE/ETHNICITY?**

Often, images of Latino, Asian and African-American athletes are absent.

**11. DOES THE DEPICTION OF THE SPORTSWOMAN PARTICIPATING OR THE THEME OF THE ADVERTISEMENT IMPLY AN ENCOURAGEMENT OR ACCEPTANCE OF UNSPORTSMANLIKE CONDUCT, LACK OF RESPECT FOR OPPONENTS OR VIOLENCE TOWARDS OTHER PLAYERS?**

Violence against women is a significant social problem. Neither men's or women's sports should encourage violent behavior toward other human beings. It is possible to be aggressive and competitive in sports without wanting to kill, maim or otherwise hurt your opponent. While some men's professional sports have embraced violence, it is not authentic or realistic to portray women's sports or most men's sports in this manner.

**12. DOES THE LOGO OR MASCOT DEPICTION OF A SCHOOL FAIRLY REFLECT BOTH MALE AND FEMALE ATHLETES?**

If an institutional logo is a male warrior, the institution should consider a double silhouette depicting male and female warriors. There might be male and female versions as mascots or mascot costumes could be made into gender neutral depictions.

## **WORDS: TREATING FEMALE AND MALE ATHLETES EQUALLY IN SPORT REPORTING, COMMENTARY, PUBLIC RELATIONS, MARKETING, AND ADVERTISING**

Despite the phenomenal growth of women's sport in the last 30 years, sports coverage in newspapers and on television and radio is still largely devoted to men's sports. And when women athletes are the subject of reports and commentary, they are sometimes referred to in words that treat them differently than men, often in ways which downplay or trivialize their achievements.

Women athletes are no different than men athletes in the skill, dedication and courage they bring to their sports. Sports commentary and reporting, like the use of the English language in general, should reflect the fundamental equality of women and men, both on and off the field.

To guard against unfair or unequal treatment of women athletes in your copy or commentary, here are a few suggestions:

## NAMES

Just as male athletes are generally referred to as “men” or “young men” so female athletes should be referred to as “women” or “young women,” and not as “girls” unless they are under 12 years of age. Female athletes should never be referred to as “ladies.” Use of first and last names should be consistent in coverage of men’s and women’s events. For example, if it’s Becker and Sampras who play tennis with great daring, then it should be Navratilova and Graf who do the same in the women’s tennis, not “Martina” and “Steffi.”

Names of teams should reflect parallel word usage. Rather than Longhorns as the name of a men’s team and Lady Longhorns as the name of a women’s team, the teams should be referred to as Longhorn Men and Longhorn Women or the Longhorn men’s basketball team and the Longhorn women’s basketball team.

## EVENTS

In sports played by both men and women, there is a tendency for men’s events to be referred to as the only game in town, as in “competition will be tough at this year’s NCAA basketball championship.” To avoid this pitfall, events should be designated as either a men’s or women’s competition.

## DESCRIPTIONS

Descriptions which place too much emphasis on physical appearances or skills not related to athletic performance should be avoided. For example:

- “She’s so fresh-faced, so blue-eyed, so ruby-lipped, so 12-car pileup gorgeous, 5 feet 5 inches and 114 pounds worth of peacekeeping missile.” – former world and Olympic figure skating champion Katarina Witt as seen through the eyes of Sports Illustrated.
- “(And it does help that Rheaume is a comely nubile with hazel eyes, a glowing complexion, and a decidedly feminine grace. There is no hint of testosterone in her nature).” – Goalie Manon Rheaume as described on the pages of the Toronto Star.

- Men athletes are generally described in terms of their athletic attributes, with words such as “dynamic,” “powerful,” “agile,” and “swift” in common usage. Women athletes should be described in similar terms. for example:
- “No, Kerrin Lee-Gartner did not need steroids to become an Olympic champion. She did it with an inner strength that knows no measure. She did it by refusing to quit, despite physical and mental anguish. She did it while growing up, far from home and family. And she did it in the best Canuck fashion of all: Purely crazy.” – Calgary Sun article on women’s Olympic downhill ski champion Kerrin Lee-Gartner.

## LANGUAGE

In light of the physical, emotional and intellectual equality of women and men, the following is a short list of do’s and don’ts:

### PARALLEL TERMS:

Have you used parallel words when referring to females and/or males

### NEUTRAL WORDS:

Have you used neutral words whenever possible?

### MODIFIERS:

Have you used appropriate nouns, adjectives and adverbs when describing athletes in competition?

### DO

- women’s team and men’s team
- Mr. Smith/Ms. Smith

- neutral noun such as the coach/trainer

- psyched
- strong
- physically fit
- conditioned
- small
- intense
- funny
- athletic

### DON'T

- men’s team/ladies team
- Mr. Smith/Sue Smith
- he (to include both sexes)
- moody
- shapely
- curvaceous
- well-built
- cute, pixie
- bouncy
- coquette
- jockette

## **IMAGE GUIDELINES FOR FEMALE ATHLETES/ACTIVE WOMEN:**

### **THE RIGHTS OF ACTIVE WOMEN TO CONTROL THE ETHICAL AND APPROPRIATE USE OF THEIR NAMES AND IMAGES**

Female athletes and women depicted in action, their families and agents are responsible for insuring that advertising agencies act ethically and with good taste when asking the athlete to pose or model for advertisements or other print and electronic media programming. The image created by the advertising agency will be the public's perception of who you are. Your name and reputation are valuable assets that must be protected through an educated and careful evaluation of all advertising, endorsement and appearance opportunities. There is nothing wrong with being depicted in business or other non-athletic dress as long as the context is appropriate and the non-athletic role is not emphasized more than the athletic ability and achievements of the athlete.

Suggested guidelines for female athlete appearances.

**1. You have the right to look athletic.**

**2. You have the right to dress as an athlete dresses.**

Women athletes should be encourage to discuss their preferences for uniforms with one another and, when desirable, to communicate these preferences to coaches and administrators. Coaches and athletic administrators should be receptive to discussing and changing policies regarding uniforms.

**3. You have the right to keep your clothes on, and not to be pictured in the process of dressing or undressing.**

**4. You have the right not to be asked to assume a physical position that is sexually provocative, uncomfortable, embarrassing or unauthentic for you.**

**5. You have a right to have your face as well as your body in the picture.**

**6. You have a right not to do anything a male athlete would not be asked to do.**

**7. You have a right to see the words that will accompany the images, and to approve of them.**

**8. You have a right not to be infantilized, nor to be put in a position that is too old for you.**

**9. You have a right to ask, “What is being sold here?”**

If you feel exploited or uncomfortable in any way, you have a right to speak up.

**10. You have a right to say “no.”**

If a product or its image or the presentation the company insists on is inconsistent with your identity, and they will not negotiate with you, you can refuse the endorsement offer.

**11. You have the right not to minimize your accomplishments or deny aspects of yourself in order to be acceptable**

(e.g. saying that it was luck that you’ve done well, that you had to be more “manly” to get ahead, etc.)

**12. You have the right not to become a caricature in any descriptive material or setting**

(e.g. Aunt Jemima because you are African American or dumb broad because you are blond).

## **Q & A: THE MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT MEDIA COVERAGE OF WOMEN’S SPORTS**

The Women’s Sports Foundation answers over 100,000 inquiries a year, a good number of which are questions about the electronic and print media coverage of women’s sports. Following are the answers to the most commonly asked questions about this topic.

### **Q1. AREN’T WOMEN ATHLETES COVERED LESS OFTEN BY THE MEDIA BECAUSE WOMEN AREN’T AS INTERESTED IN SPORTS AS MEN?**

A1. There is no evidence to support this contention.



- Nationwide data indicate that women make up 38-42 percent of all sport and physical activity participants. Yet, research shows that sportswomen receive only 8.7 percent of the total sports coverage. (Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, Gender in Televised Sport, 1999)
- In 1983, approximately 70 percent of 1,100 people polled by Miller Lite and the Women's Sports Foundation said they would be equally interested in watching women's and men's sports.
- Research by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles shows that the primary factor in determining what sports get covered in newspapers is the sports interests of the sports editor. Many sports editors grew up in a time and culture in which the abilities of women to play sports were devalued.

## **Q2. WHAT IS WRONG WITH WANTING TO PORTRAY WOMEN ATHLETES AS FEMININE AND PHYSICALLY ATTRACTIVE?**

A2. There is nothing wrong with women wanting to look feminine/attractive from a traditional perspective. However, female athletes deserve the same respect for their athletic abilities as is afforded male athletes. When a female athlete appears in a sport publication or advertisement to promote a sport or fitness product, she should be portrayed respectfully as is her male counterpart – as a skilled athlete.

## **Q3. WHAT IS THE HARM IN PORTRAYING FEMALE ATHLETES AS PRETTY AND FEMININE?**

A3. Images are powerful tools that shape and reflect attitudes and values. By portraying sportswomen either as sex objects or as “pretty ladies”, the message is that sportswomen are not strong, powerful and highly skilled individuals. Ultimately, images that ignore or trivialize females undermine the importance of women's sports and respect for the abilities of female athletes.

## **Q4. AREN'T THE PRODUCERS OF ADVERTISING AND PROMOTIONAL IMAGES USING PRETTY AND FEMININE FEMALE ATHLETE IMAGES TO HELP PROMOTE WOMEN'S ATHLETICS?**

A4. There are no scientific studies indicating that when sportswomen are portrayed as “pretty ladies” it increases interest in event attendance at or media coverage of women’s sports. People go to see women’s sports for the same reasons they go to see men’s sports – because the athletes are good. Portraying females in ways that emphasize their skills as athletes, not as “bathing beauties” is what sells tickets. Advertisers or promoters who use sexist imagery to sell women’s sports are actually selling women athletes as sex objects rather than athletes.

**Q5. DOESN'T SELLING WOMEN ATHLETES AS FEMININE AND PRETTY SOLVE THE “IMAGE PROBLEM” ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN'S SPORTS? DON'T MOST PEOPLE THINK THAT FEMALE ATHLETES ARE LESBIANS AND ISN'T IT IMPORTANT TO SHOW THAT THEY AREN'T?**

A5. The so-called “image problem” is really a code term for “homophobia” – fear of homosexuality. The function of the media is not to sell “heterosexism” or “sexist images” for that matter. All heterosexuals are not attractive and all lesbians are not mannish. The function of the media is to cover sports and athletes rather than assume their sexual preference. There are lesbians and gays in men’s and women’s sports. There are heterosexuals in men’s and women’s sports. Those are private matters best left to individuals rather than advertisers and reporters. A reporter doesn’t go up to a male athlete and ask the gender of who he sleeps with. That question is equally inappropriate for female athletes. The assumption that the public assumes that all female athletes are lesbians and the reporter or advertiser has a responsibility to fix this is absurd.

**Q6. IN TERMS OF ADVERTISING, SEXY IMAGES OF WOMEN APPEAR TO WORK. THEY SELL PRODUCTS. SO THIS MUST BE WHAT THE CONSUMER WANTS TO SEE. THEY WOULDN'T DO IT IF IT DIDN'T MAKE MONEY.**

A6. This position reveals a remarkable insensitivity to the harmful effects of sexist stereotyping. The advertising or sports media should not perpetuate harmful, limiting images toward any group of individuals. Saying, “This is what the audience wants” and, “This is what sells” would not be tolerated if the images perpetuated racist or anti-Semitic stereotypes. The position should not be tolerated if the images perpetuate the stereotype of women as sex objects.

**Q7. SO WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE THE MEDIA DO? WHAT KIND OF IMAGES WOULD MAKE WOMEN ATHLETES HAPPY?**

A7. The media should simply reflect the reality of women's diverse sports experiences – from grace and beauty to physical strength, endurance and power. A balanced and realistic view is what is absent in the media. Young girls and women from all ages, races, and social class backgrounds are breaking down historical barriers to their participation. The media is obligated to reflect and perpetuate that reality – not the homophobia or stereotypes of individual reporters or advertisers – so that sportswomen (our daughters and sisters and moms) receive the admiration, dignity and respect they deserve....the same admiration, dignity and respect afforded male athletes.

## FACTS:

In the five-year history of ESPN The Magazine, spanning approximately 136 cover images, only two female athletes – Serena Williams and Marion Jones – have appeared alone on the cover. Three covers featured, respectively, cheerleaders, groupies, and a male athlete's girlfriend; two included photos of women athletes with other male athletes; and one featured Ricky Williams in a wedding dress. (AAF Sports Letter, June 2003)

In a study at Vanderbilt University, researchers found that men received 82% of all sports coverage and women received 11% with 6% covering both genders in three newspapers: The Tennessean, USA Today, and The New York Times. (Coaching Women's Basketball, Jan./Feb.1997)

In the 52 weeks of Sports Illustrated in 1999, four women were awarded cover shots: a swimsuit model, Serena Williams, Brandi Chastain, and the U.S. Women's World Cup Team. In 2000, seven covers featured women: a swimsuit model, a ticket price issue featuring a "nuclear" family; an L.A. Clipper fan with a bag over her head, Shea Ralph, Anna Kournikova, Megan Quann and Marion Jones. In 2001, the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders were the only women on the cover of Sports Illustrated. (Women's Sports Foundation Research, 1996-2001)

In TV Guide's list of TV's 50 Greatest Sports Moments, only 3 ½ featured women – Torvill & Dean's gold medal winning performance at the 1984 Olympic Winter Games (#10), Kerri Strug's courageous vault at the 1996 Olympic Games (#14), Bonnie Blair's history-making performance at the 1994 Games, becoming the first U.S. woman Olympian in any sport to win more than four gold medals (#20) and Joan Benoit's victory in the first Olympic marathon for women in 1984 (#26). (TV Guide, July 11-16, 1998)

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