

## **Covering women's sport? An analysis of Sports Illustrated covers from 1987-2009 and ESPN The Magazine covers from 1998-2009**

**Adam Martin<sup>1</sup> & Mary G. McDonald<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Kinesiology and Health, Western Program for Individualized Studies, Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

### **Abstract**

This content analysis builds upon previous sport media scholarship (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Duncan & Messner, 2005; Messner & Cooky, 2010) to examine the covers of the two US sporting magazines with the highest circulation: *Sports Illustrated* (from 1987-2009) and *ESPN the Magazine* (1998-2009). Guided by previous feminist works, the authors critique the amount and types of coverage afforded men and women on the covers of these sporting periodicals and observe changes since 1987 - the final year covered by Lumpkin and Williams' (1991) longitudinal study which documented the persistent under-representation of women on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*. This current study found declining coverage as 8.75% of the periodicals' covers from 1987-1994 contained women, only 6.38% of the covers from 1995-2003 and 4.88% of the covers from 2003-2009 featured women. Additionally, the majority of females were depicted in passive poses (63.7% of all females), while the majority of males were depicted in active roles (61.1% of all males, and 73.5% of *Sports Illustrated* covers). Furthermore, female sports figures were frequently sexualized and/or featured in ways which emphasized conventional feminine norms, thus serving to trivialize their athletic accomplishments.

**Keywords:** under-representation; gender; ideology; content analysis; media power.

**Article citation:** Martin, A. & McDonald, M. G. (2012) Covering Women's Sport? An Analysis of Sports Illustrated Covers from 1987-2009 and ESPN the Magazine Covers from 1998-2009. *Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise & Physical Education Research*, 1:81-97.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Among the important topics within the critical study of sport is the scholarly focus on media representations. Several scholars (Bishop, 2003; Duncan & Messner, 2005; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Messner & Cooky, 2010) have conducted content and critical analyses of the media to document its considerable influence in shaping public perceptions regarding women's sport. The early groundwork for these studies occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, when scholars first systematically established both the differential ways in which female athletes are represented and the degree to which they are under-represented in relation to their male counterparts.

Paving the way for later works, a landmark US study by Lumpkin and Williams (1991), found that only eight per cent of *Sports Illustrated* magazines from 1954-1987 contained a feature article concerning a female sports figure. The longitudinal nature and novelty of the study's findings helped to marshal scholarly interest in gender and sport media, including the ways in which magazine producers represent sporting events and athletes. As Lumpkin and Williams suggest, magazine covers are significant representational sites, as they communicate a sense of cultural importance and have been historically used as a means of enticing readers into the magazine's content. Buoyed by similar scholarship, subsequent feminist critics have argued that a variety of US media have failed to adequately cover women's sport, thus suggesting that these media serve as sites "for the reproduction of gender relations that privilege men over women" (Birrell & Theberge, 1994, p. 341). Furthermore, in the few cases where female athletes do receive coverage, they are frequently framed within "dominant patriarchal images of women" that "distort, trivialize, marginalize, and heterosexualize women athletes" (Birrell & Theberge, 1994, p. 341).

Dating back to the 1980s, studies have shown popular media including newspapers, magazines, telecasts, and other outlets have consistently depicted far fewer women than men in sporting contexts (Birrell & Theberge, 1994; Duncan & Messner, 2005; Messner & Cooky, 2010). While sport participation rates for women continue to grow in the US and across the globe, popular media outlets have not mimicked such growth. Furthermore, recent scholarship by Duncan and Messner (2005) as well as Messner and Cooky (2010) – which will be discussed in more detail below – suggests that the amount of coverage of women's sport on television newscasts has actually declined over the past 15 years; as feminists have long argued this lack of coverage "maintains the myth that sports are exclusively by, about, and for men" (Messner & Cooky, 2010, p. 21).

Given these findings of declining coverage and the powerful role of the media in "normalizing gender beliefs and attitudes," it is important to continue to investigate the amount and types of coverage afforded to female athletes (Duncan & Messner, 2005, p. 20). In particular, this analysis examines whether the declining coverage found in news broadcasts is also apparent within the covers of sport magazines. It builds upon Lumpkin and Williams' initial systematic investigation to examine the covers of *Sports Illustrated* magazine from 1987-2009 and also the more recently launched *ESPN the Magazine* from 1998-2009, to gauge the amount and types of coverage afforded men and women on the covers of these sporting periodicals. Before discussing this study in greater depth, we review the relevant literature in order to engage issues related to the under-representation and misrepresentation of women in sport.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Under-representation

Lumpkin and Williams' (1991) content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* feature articles from 1954-1987 is among the first systematic account to document the infinitesimal amount

of coverage given to female athletes in that periodical. According to Lumpkin and Williams, 3068 (88.8%) of the articles published during that time were authored by men, and 3178 (90.8%) of the feature stories were written about male sport figures. Comparatively, women wrote 157 (4.5%) of the articles, and females were the subject of 280 (8.0%) of the feature stories. When covered, most features on women found them in "sex appropriate" sports such as tennis, golf, and swimming (p. 26). Also worth mentioning is the fact that, on average, the total column length for articles with male subjects was 65 inches, while articles regarding females measured about 54 inches. During this time period, no women were portrayed in stereotypically "male" sports such as hockey, rugby, football, baseball, race car driving, or boxing. While the total number of articles featuring women was dwarfed by those about men, Lumpkin and Williams (1991) found on average, that feature articles concerning women actually contained more pictures than male features, (3.24 compared with 2.97, respectively). This is interesting because although more was written about males, when females did receive coverage they were visually depicted at higher rates within the pages of *Sports Illustrated*. Unfortunately, no information was offered by Lumpkin and Williams as to the types of poses portrayed (i.e. active, passive, posed, during competition, etc.). However, analysis of the language used to describe females was performed, which will be discussed in the *Misrepresentation* section of this work.

A follow-up study by Fink and Kensicki (2002) analysed 958 articles (all featuring pictures) in *Sports Illustrated* from 1997-1999, revealing that 862 articles contained pictures of men, while only 96 offered images of women. During that same time frame, within 816 non-photographic articles, 735 made reference to males, while only 82 referred to females (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). Quantitatively, this means that a mere 10% of articles with or without photographs included women in their storylines. These findings are consistent with that of Bishop's (2003) analysis of *Sports Illustrated* from 1980-1986 where female athletes received coverage in eight per cent of feature articles and in ten per cent of all photographs.

This pattern of under-representation is not limited to periodicals such as *Sports Illustrated*, as scholarship by Duncan and Messner (2005) reveals. Their analyses of television news programming, conducted over a six week period in 2004, monitored sport coverage within the Los Angeles area including the ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates as well as ESPN's *Sportscenter* and Fox's *Southern California Sports Report*. Based upon the data gathered, Duncan and Messner (2005, p. 4) noted that:

"Women's sports were under-reported in the six weeks of early evening and late-night television sports news on three network affiliates [KNBC, KCBS, and KABC] sampled in the study. Men's sports received 91.4% of the airtime, women's sports 6.3%, and gender-neutral topics 2.4%. These numbers indicate a decline in the coverage of women's sports since 1999, when 8.7% of the airtime was devoted to women's sports."

Additionally, ESPN's *Sportscenter* and all the observed Fox network programmes gave even less coverage. For every 'female story' that a Fox production ran, there were

fifteen 'male stories,' and the *Sportscenter* ratio was 1:20 (Duncan & Messner, 2005). Perhaps most significantly though, is the fact that every single broadcast covered men's sport in some way, but nearly 60% of network affiliate shows and just under half of Fox and *Sportscenter* telecasts portrayed no content of women's sports whatsoever (Duncan & Messner, 2005). A follow-up study by Messner and Cooky (2010) suggests that network-affiliated news coverage (KNBC, KCBS, KABC) of women's sport has declined even further from nine per cent in 1999, to six per cent in 2004, to two per cent in 2009. Messner and Cooky (2010) also document a similar decline on *SportsCenter*, where women received two per cent of the airtime in 2004 and only one per cent in 2009. The authors conclude that the once "optimistic prediction of an evolutionary rise in TV news coverage of women's sports has proven to be wrong" (Messner and Cooky, 2010, p. 22).

The exception to this rule is often found in coverage of major international events such as the Olympic Games, where nationalistic loyalties means that the focus on women's sport is generally increased for a short period of time, although the amount of coverage still pales in comparison with that afforded comparable men's international sporting events (Markula, 2009). Despite these increased numbers, most feminist researchers continue to "question whether a mere increase in the amount of coverage results in better representations of women's sport" given the media's overemphasis of representing stereotypically feminine sports (Markula, 2009, p. 3).

When considering the issue of under-representation in sport media, the work performed by Hardin, et al. (2006) is also worth discussion. The authors note that "[a]spirational journalists learn, ideally, to reject news values that position one demographic group as more worthy of coverage than others," (p. 430), yet their study revealed that current textbooks did a poor job of promoting this ideal. Specifically, Hardin et al. performed a content analysis of eight sport journalism textbooks and determined the following: 89% of all references across all texts were made in regard to men; 89% of references made specifically to sports journalists featured men; 48% of references to women were not even in a sporting context; and newer textbooks reflected little to no increase in the percentage of in-text references to sporting women. The findings of this study are crucial, because sport journalism textbooks help inform the practices of future sport media personnel. According to Hardin and colleagues, textbooks maintain dominant culture beliefs which "reinforce the idea that sports and sports journalism are masculine" and "promote the gender stereotypes of sports... and, therefore, provide a model for students to maintain those patterns rather than promoting the realities of women's sports" (p. 441).

### **Misrepresentation**

Compounding the issue of under-representation is the issue of misrepresentation, which portrays female athletes in non-athletic and/or stereotypical ways. Fink and Kensicki (2002) have characterized the most frequently occurring types of these (mis)representations and categorized them as follows: *dressed but poised and pretty*, which meant that "[p]erson(s) dressed in athletic apparel but posed for the photograph... [were] not engaged in athletic activity" (p. 325). Representation of the

*non-sport setting*, which conveyed the notion that someone was “dressed in non-athletic apparel and photographed in a non-athletic setting”, and the categorization of *pornographic*, which suggested that the athlete was dressed “provocatively or photographed in such a way as to focus solely on sexual attributes (e.g., photograph framed on an athlete’s breasts)” (p. 325). The authors also investigated whether or not athletes were engaged in athletic action including game action, and found that only 34% of women pictured in *Sports Illustrated* were shown in athletic action, 55% were in a non-sport setting, and 5% were displayed in pornographic poses compared with 66%, 23%, and 0% respectively, for males.

A review of recent covers reveals that Fine and Kensicki’s research categorization is still relevant for investigating more recent *Sports Illustrated* publications. For example, the category *dressed but poised and pretty* suggests that athletes wear suitable attire to compete in their respective sport, but are not portrayed in a way which conveys athletic action. The May 19, 2008 issue of *Sports Illustrated* further demonstrates this, as it features race car driver Danica Patrick in her racing gear, hands resting on her helmet, looking at the camera. She appears to be wearing make-up, and is not positioned near her race car. Such images serve to perpetuate the damaging stereotype that women still don’t belong in sport by placing them on the sidelines or periphery of a sporting context rather than directly in one. Furthermore, the category of *non-sport* setting can also be found in recent magazine issues. One example includes the March 24, 2008 *ESPN the Magazine* cover of Venus and Serena Williams, wearing white dresses. Without knowing that Venus and Serena are accomplished tennis players, one is left to guess at whether or not they are indeed athletes. To be fair, this cover commemorated the 10-year anniversary of the magazine, and none of the athletes chosen for inclusion on the cover were depicted in any way that would identify them as participants of their respective sport. And yet, because most females are more often portrayed in passive poses, these images serve to trivialize female athletic accomplishment, which is amplified due to the virtual non-existence of females on magazine covers.

The *pornographic/sexualized image of women in sport* has been discussed by several authors. In Duncan’s (1990) content analysis of Olympic photography from 1984 and 1988, the issue of sexualization was discussed as detrimental to the perceived athleticism of female athletes. One of the most oft-pictured athletes, track star Florence Griffith-Joyner, was regularly photographed in sexualized ways which were reinforced with text alongside the picture. Duncan provides examples of phrases used to represent the star such as: “Joyner’s rapier-like, intricately painted fingernails...lavish make-up and racy one-legged running suits that emphasize the sexual” (Duncan, 1990, p. 28). Additionally, captions such as “Griffith-Joyner is something to behold, both on and off the track” function to “trivialize Griffith-Joyner’s athletic accomplishments” (Duncan, 1990, p. 29) by referring to athletic achievements mostly in concert with physical/sexual appeal. These and similar representation are made all the more convincing given the ideological power of photography to project an “aura of naturalness, realism and authenticity” despite conventions which add aesthetic interpretations “subjected to artificial processes” such as being “cropped, air brushed, reduced, enlarged and retouched” (Duncan, 1990, p. 23). As for the significance of soft pornographic poses,

Kuhn (1985) argues “to possess the image of a woman’s sexuality is, however mass-produced the image, also in some way to possess, to maintain a degree of control over, woman in general”. In this way, mass-produced sexualized and semi-pornographic pictures of women, such as the annual *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, serve as a means of maintaining systemic control over women.

Related to this latter category, Lumpkin and Williams’ (1991) qualitative analysis also included a focus on the linguistic content of the *Sports Illustrated* articles. The authors explored the ways in which the magazine constructed ideals of emphasized femininity in terms of excessive references to body dimensions, physical attractiveness, and/or dress, particularly in the majority of articles written by men. According to their research, specific vernacular was used to describe female athletes, and included words such as: *beauty; sexy; sex symbol; tawny; graceful; perfection* (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991, p. 29). Through the use of these types of phrases, media producers often assume that their idealized audience of heterosexual men prefer to not only see conventionally attractive (heteronormative) women but also “prefer ‘little girls and sweethearts’ (such as tennis players or gymnasts)” (Markula, 2009, p. 9). Additionally, the often repeated portrayal of sporting women within the nuclear family as mothers/wives/girlfriends of men not only serves as a defensive response to homophobia surrounding both a lesbian presence and women’s participation in stereotypically ‘masculine’ sports, but also effectively “ensures that women’s sport is not a serious threat to men’s sport and thus is of lesser importance” (Markula, 2009, p. 10).

Given the above findings, three guiding questions helped to structure this analysis of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* covers since 1987, the year last covered in Lumpkin and Williams’ study. Each question will be specifically discussed and answered in the results section.

Q1 – *Have Sports Illustrated and ESPN the Magazine improved the amount of coverage afforded women’s sports? Specifically, has the percentage of females on the covers of these magazines increased or decreased since 1987, the year last documented by Lumpkin and Williams?*

Q2 – *Do these sports magazine covers depict women actively in approximately the same proportion as active men?*

Q3 – *Are there any significant trends in coverage?*

## **METHOD: CONTENT ANALYSIS**

This study builds upon and extends the scholarship on under-representation and misrepresentation by seeking to contemporize Lumpkin and Williams’ (1991) analysis of the covers of sport magazines. In particular, this work seeks to describe both the extent and ways in which female athletes are represented on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* in the years since Lumpkin and Williams conducted their study. It also includes *ESPN the Magazine* (established March 11, 1998), and explores the extent and ways in which women are represented on these magazine covers. At the time of Lumpkin and Williams’ study, *Sports Illustrated* was the predominant sporting magazine, but the

advent of *ESPN the Magazine* has provided yet another important print outlet, and is included here to more fully capture the portrayal of females in popular sports media.

For the coding phase of this project, each magazine cover from *ESPN the Magazine* (January 1998 through to December 2009) and *Sports Illustrated* (January 1987 through to December 2009) was critically examined. To ensure better consistency, the entire set of covers of each magazine published during this time was reviewed twice by the first author, using identical criteria for each individual cover. This served as a 'double-checking' mechanism which ensured a higher consistency in the data by reducing the number of inconsistencies within each subjective interpretation, following the methodology employed by Lumpkin and Williams. It is also worth clarifying the importance of two situations: some covers feature both men and women while others have no human subjects. The former means that in some years the sum of the per cent of covers with men plus the per cent of covers with women is just slightly over 100% (see the chart below).<sup>1</sup> As with any coding procedure, this process is subjective, and different viewers may "read" each cover differently. What follows is a section detailing the rationale for coding certain covers as active or passive.

### **Classifying as Active/Passive and the Need for Critical Readings**

As for the specific criteria, the data collection methods employed by Hardin, et al. (2006) in their study of journalism textbooks were modified slightly to cater to the content analysis of sport magazine covers. Commonalities of the studies included classifying individuals in pictures as male or female, as well as active or passive. However, where the Hardin, et al. (2006) study noted what category of sport each subject played ("power, contact, non-contact/non-aesthetic, aesthetic, or not applicable"), the coding used here was simplified to simply active or passive. Initially, the categorization of active/posed was used, but this categorical process proved to be unhelpful due to the fact that actively posed covers exist (i.e. a pitcher tossing up a baseball and smiling at the camera). The active/passive dichotomy was utilized instead, as it was more in line with previous research on *Sports Illustrated* magazine. The analysis was initiated by coding each cover in terms of whether or not there was a male and/or female on each cover.

For the purpose of this study, active covers consisted of any picture including or inferring motions from sport or that mimicked sport movement. Active covers were ones which showed in-game action, intensity, sweat, and included such actions as players being tackled, dodging tackles, batters wincing while being hit by pitches, stretched and flexed muscles, blocked shots, backswings, diving catches, and similar movements. Active covers often featured players who looked athletic, determined and/or intimidating. Conversely, passive covers tended to have a calm, posed, or nonchalant feel about them. Poses included sitting and smiling at the camera, glancing away from the camera in seeming idleness – and in the case of the swimsuit issues in particular— overt sexualization of the body in ways meant to elicit gaze from the viewer. Posed subjects often looked timid, non-threatening, and non-athletic. In addition, fans watching action which took place in the foreground of the cover were considered passive. For instance, the May 25, 2009 cover features NBA star LeBron James in the foreground, while many

fans in the crowd are visibly enjoying James' display. The crowd has many females and males, all of whom were coded as passive.

To better illustrate the coding process, what follows is an analysis of a *Sports Illustrated* cover featuring Michael Jordan from February 14, 2000. At first glance, the image of Jordan idly holding a basketball suggests passivity, however this cover was coded as active because it appears that Jordan is eyeing the rim, flexing his arm and readying his shot: a sports movement that he would use during a game. The July 22, 1992 cover featuring Jackie Joyner-Kersey in the middle of an attempt to throw the javelin with back arm cocked back was similarly coded as active. In contrast, the June 28, 1993 cover depicting Jordan holding the NBA Championship Trophy in one hand, a basketball in the other was coded as passive. He and teammate Scottie Pippen are celebrating the Bulls' 3rd championship victory, but are not captured in a way which portrays any sports movement. Another example of a passively coded cover was the May 10, 1993 issue of *Sports Illustrated*. On the cover, a visibly terrified Monica Seles is being held and tended to by at least two people after she was attacked with a knife on the tennis court. She is lying down, depicted not only as a victim, but also as a passive recipient of the attack, unable to do anything about it on her own. The July 19, 2004 cover of *ESPN the Magazine* offers insight into the difficulty of coding covers. Here, current WNBA star Diana Taurasi is actively spinning or balancing a basketball on her finger, yet the athlete on this cover is clearly posed. Because active classification would consist of performing or mimicking a movement used in one's respective sport, this cover was considered passive as Taurasi would not use this move in a game of basketball. Another cover which demonstrates ambiguity is the September 18, 2000 issue of *Sports Illustrated* which depicts former Indiana University men's basketball coach, Bob Knight yelling. While this could be read and coded as an active pose, the criteria of this study deemed the cover to be passive because this is not a sport movement (although Knight did his fair share of yelling during games).

The results obtained through this process have been compiled and presented in the chart that follows. In order to better illustrate these numerical findings, several covers were subsequently chosen as representative of the categories featured in this analysis. These covers were then subjected to a critical interpretive analysis, as guided by previous analyses of *Sports Illustrated*, where they were evaluated for particular themes and images contained within each. These "critical readings" better demonstrate the ideological significance of these representations and follow Birrell and Theberge's (1994) call for the use of critical cultural study methodologies to better understand the powerful influence of gendered framings within sport media.

## RESULTS

### **Q1 – Have Sports Illustrated and ESPN the Magazine improved the amount of coverage afforded women's sports? Specifically, has the percentage of females on the covers of these magazines increased or decreased since 1987, the year last documented by Lumpkin and Williams?**

In this review, 1421 *Sports Illustrated* and 355 *ESPN the Magazine* covers were analysed, representing a total of 1776 issues. The aggregate number of females on covers was 113 out of 1776 (6.36%); males, on the other hand, were depicted on 1665 of 1776 covers (93.91%). Lumpkin and Williams (1991) found that 8.0% of feature articles in *Sports Illustrated* magazines focused on female subjects, while this study revealed an aggregate of 6.36% of covers featuring females. More specifically, *Sports Illustrated* printed a cover with a female on only 6.54% of the issues, while *ESPN the Magazine* ran female covers on 5.63% of their issues. By any metric, the answer to Q1 is a resounding no – *Sport Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* have not improved the number of females featured on their covers. In fact, the amount of coverage has actually declined by nearly 50% over the course of the years investigated in this study (see the response to Question 3 below for further analysis).

### **Q2 – Do these sports magazine covers depict women actively in approximately the same proportion as active men?**

This study found that only 41 of the 113 (36.3%) observed covers featuring a female portrayed her in an active way, while 63.7% of the images featured passive depictions. In fact, a miniscule 41 issues out of all 1776 of the covers studied (2.31%) featured an active female. Importantly, 18 of the 20 (90%) females on *ESPN the Magazine* were portrayed passively, while 54 of the 93 (58.1%) females on *Sports Illustrated* covers were coded as passive.

Combining *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* covers, 1018 of 1665 (61.1%) males were depicted actively, with 38.9% considered as passive. In total, covers with an active male account for 57.3% of all *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* covers. A much higher percentage of males were depicted as active on *Sports Illustrated* covers – 978 of 1330 were represented as active (73.5%), while only 40 of 335 (11.9%) of *ESPN the Magazine* covers included men coded as active. As such, *ESPN the Magazine* presented a different dynamic of sport to viewers regardless of the athletes' gender, as most athletes were shown in passive poses, while *Sports Illustrated* tended to display the more active side of hegemonic masculinity. Given these numbers, the answer to Q2 is also in the negative – women are not portrayed as active in the same proportion as men.

### **Q3 – Are there any significant trends in coverage?**

While classifying and analysing the covers from each year, it seemed as though a progressively smaller percentage of covers displayed females. To investigate this apparent trend, data was broken down into three time periods, each with roughly an equal number of years: 1987-1994, 1995-2002, and 2003-2009. This aggregated data helped to isolate key trends. One identifiable trend is the decreasing percentage of

covers which featured women. During the first time period, 8.75% of covers featured females, while 6.38% of the covers featuring females in the second period. Only 4.88% of covers featured females during the last period studied. This final figure of just below five per cent is consistent with the data reported by Hardin, et al. (2006) in their study of sport journalism textbooks. The issue of declining representation also mirrors the previously discussed findings by Messner and Cooky (2010) as well as Duncan and Messner (2005).

One complicating trend also noted is the increasing depiction of men in passive poses on the magazine covers. This clearly is a new development and most likely reflects the broader movement toward the exaltation of celebrity and celebrity athletes within US culture. While *ESPN the Magazine* has a history of depicting men as passive, also of interest is how the *Sports Illustrated* data changed once *ESPN the Magazine* was established in 1998; perhaps as a response to the advent of *ESPN the Magazine* and its focus on sporting personalities, *Sports Illustrated* has more recently shown a higher percentage of passive male athletes on its covers. To demonstrate more fully, consider that *Sports Illustrated* covers from 1987-1997 (1997 was the last year before *ESPN the Magazine* was put into circulation) featured 558 covers with males, 124 of whom were featured in passive poses (22.2%). From 1998-2009, however, 772 covers featured males, 228 of whom were represented passively (29.5%). The years 2006-2009 help to demonstrate this trend more explicitly, as 245 covers depicted males, 114 of whom were coded as passive (46.5%). This is a development which warrants further attention and is an issue we discuss more fully below.

The theme of "women's sport as tragic" (Birrell & Theberge, 1994) appeared as a phenomenon among *Sports Illustrated* magazine covers in 1993 and 1994. In 1993, three out of the four covers featuring females depicted female sport participation as "tragic" and in 1994, one more such cover was run. The total was four females depicted in "tragic" or victimized fashion out of eleven during that two-year period. The trend started with the aforementioned cover which featured Monica Seles after a knife attack on the court, and encompassed several different angles on the tragic issue of women in sports. Others included a cover which featured the then recent widows (Patti Olin and Laurie Crews) of Cleveland Indian pitchers Steve Olin and Tim Crews who were killed in a boating accident, figure skater Nancy Kerrigan cover referencing the physical attack on her knee, and also a visibly concerned tennis player, Mary Pierce, with the headline "Why Mary Pierce Fears For Her Life." The accompanying story was a report about Pierce's abusive father.

**Table 1:** Content Analysis of *Sports Illustrated* Covers, 1987-2009

Year	Total Covers	Total Females	Percent Female	# Passive Female	% Passive Female	Total Males	Percent Male	# Passive Males	% Passive Males
1987	51	3	5.88%	2	66.67%	49	96.08%	8	12.24%
1988	54	9	16.67%	3	33.33%	46	85.19%	13	8.70%
1989	50	4	8.00%	3	75.00%	46	92.00%	15	26.09%
1990	52	4	7.69%	1	25.00%	48	92.31%	13	25.00%
1991	51	2	3.92%	1	50.00%	49	96.08%	6	18.37%
1992	52	4	7.69%	2	50.00%	48	92.31%	6	6.67%
1993	57	4	7.02%	3	75.00%	53	92.98%	12	24.53%
1994	56	7	12.50%	5	71.43%	49	87.50%	10	26.53%
1995	58	4	6.90%	3	75.00%	54	93.10%	13	27.78%
1996	61	5	8.20%	4	80.00%	56	91.80%	13	28.57%
1997	63	3	4.76%	2	66.67%	60	95.24%	15	25.00%
1998	65	3	4.62%	3	100.00%	62	95.38%	9	24.19%
1999	61	4	6.56%	2	50.00%	57	93.44%	14	19.30%
2000	57	5	8.77%	3	60.00%	52	91.23%	14	26.92%
2001	62	2	3.23%	2	100.00%	60	96.77%	18	30.00%
2002	59	5	8.47%	2	40.00%	54	91.53%	17	31.48%
2003	83	4	4.82%	1	25.00%	79	95.18%	14	17.72%
2004	76	4	5.26%	2	50.00%	72	94.74%	13	18.06%
2005	95	4	4.21%	2	50.00%	91	95.79%	15	16.48%
2006	74	4	5.41%	3	75.00%	70	94.59%	35	50.00%
2007	64	4	6.25%	2	50.00%	60	93.75%	17	28.33%
2008	60	3	5.00%	2	66.67%	57	95.00%	28	49.12%
2009	60	2	3.33%	1	50.00%	58	96.67%	34	58.62%
Total	1421	93	6.54%	54	58.06%	1330	93.60%	352	26.47%

### Critical Readings

One magazine cover was chosen from both *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* for a close, critical reading in order to shed light upon different ways sporting women were misrepresented within these periodicals. Each respective cover was selected because it was a prototypically representational cover based on the data from each source. To clarify, each source showed that a majority of females were portrayed as passive, and often posed; therefore each critical read was performed on a cover which represents women in this way. Furthermore, *ESPN the Magazine* depicted an overwhelming majority of both males and females in passive and posed positions (that is, non-game photographs), so a cover was selected which showed posed males and females. One significant concept to consider with regards to these critical readings is a

point made by Duncan (1990, p. 23) that when “one looks at a photograph, one is impressed by the realness, accuracy, and tangibility of the objects therein... [to the extent that] photographs may acquire the legal status of documents and testimonials”. This pseudo-authenticity is powerful, as it perpetuates beliefs about binary gender categories, and serves to naturalize the myth that sport is a so-called man’s realm. Resonance with the reader, then, makes these representations all the more profound.

**Table 2:** Content Analysis of *ESPN the Magazine* Covers, 1998-2009

Year	Total Covers	Total Females	Percent Female	# Passive Female	% Passive Female	Total Males	Percent Male	# Passive Male	% Passive Male
1998	21	1	4.76%	1	100.00%	21	100.00%	17	80.95%
1999	30	0	0.00%	N/A	N/A	30	100.00%	26	86.67%
2000	25	4	16.00%	3	75.00%	23	92.00%	21	91.30%
2001	34	0	0.00%	N/A	N/A	32	94.12%	21	65.63%
2002	29	1	3.45%	1	100.00%	27	93.10%	26	96.30%
2003	26	2	7.69%	2	100.00%	24	92.31%	23	95.83%
2004	26	1	3.85%	1	100.00%	25	96.15%	23	92.00%
2005	27	2	7.41%	2	100.00%	24	88.89%	23	95.83%
2006	32	1	3.13%	1	100.00%	32	100.00%	30	93.75%
2007	32	0	0.00%	N/A	N/A	32	100.00%	28	87.50%
2008	39	3	7.69%	3	100.00%	37	94.87%	34	91.89%
2009	34	5	14.71%	4	80.00%	28	82.35%	23	82.14%
Total	355	20	5.63%	18	90.00%	335	94.37%	295	88.06%

**\*Note that in several years, column three plus column nine equals less than 100% or greater than 100%. If greater, it was due to males and females both appearing on one cover, and if lesser, it was because of a cover that featured neither male nor female.**

The March 15, 2004 *ESPN the Magazine* cover features the then Marlins’ slugger, Miguel Cabrera, on a boat with two women in bikinis. Cabrera’s pose is standing and smiling, towering over the two scantily clad models (research was unable to determine whether or not the two were affiliated with any professional sport). Both women are portrayed in passively posed positions which accentuate their breasts. Furthermore, both bodies are white, very tan, slim, and defined but not muscular. The headline reads: “Fantasy Time” and notes that this issue will include fantasy baseball rankings “(and other keepers)”. While fantasy baseball is a popular pastime, the headline and parenthetical phrases mentioned above refer to the two conventionally attractive, barely-clothed women on the boat with Cabrera. Without stretching the imagination, it would be reasonable to read this cover as Miguel Cabrera in a superior position, with the models in inferior positions, which “enable[s] viewers to identify with patriarchal ends” (Duncan, 1990, p. 24). Cabrera is an MVP-calibre professional baseball player, and as the idealized symbol of all men, his presence towers over these women. Other women could have been featured on this cover with Cabrera, but the use of two women unassociated with professional sports plays on the bias that women don’t belong in

sports, but are outsiders. It is seemingly no coincidence that *ESPN the Magazine* chose conventionally attractive women for this role, and posed them suggestively in skimpy bathing suits. This *ESPN the Magazine* cover was similar to the annual *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit covers, which serve to perpetuate the same idea that women are outsiders within sport and just look pretty.

The July 11, 2005 *Sports Illustrated* cover features a posed picture of softball legend, Jennie Finch, who serves as a prototypically sexualized and trivialized female on a *Sports Illustrated* magazine. On this cover, Finch is passively posed in a way which intends to attract or intrigue readers to what is called the "*Sports Illustrated* Summer Party". Finch is clearly wearing make-up, and dressed in a way which reveals her midriff. While she could have been dressed in USA softball gear to more clearly identify her as an athlete, *Sports Illustrated* chose to take the *posed and pretty* approach, never explicitly mentioning the connection to her athleticism as one of the most successful softball pitchers of all time. Additionally, the cover also shows an image of comedian Bill Murray pointing his finger in the direction of Jennie Finch's breasts. In this way, Finch has not only been denied her due identification as a world-class athlete, but she is also reduced from a woman to an object composed of particular body parts. Timothy Jon Curry (1991, p. 129) explains the significance of this phenomenon, noting that:

"Women's identities as people are of no consequence in these displays. The fact that women are viewed as objects is also evident in the tendency of men to dissect women's bodies into parts, which are then discussed separately from the whole person."

A subtle allusion to her sport is made, as Finch is posed with a wiffle ball and bat in hand. For those who may not recognize the star, however, this framing may more likely suggest a connection with the theme of the magazine's "Summer Issue". Wiffle ball is typically played in backyards by young, uncoordinated children, and here softball icon Jennie Finch appears on the cover of one of the most important US sport periodicals with children's toys in hand. In this way, *Sports Illustrated* has effectively delegitimized the sport of softball and the player's accomplishments within it. Furthermore, Finch shares the front stage with a smaller picture and caption of an article entitled "Greatest Sports Animals". Here again, women's sport is downgraded to the same level of importance as animals in sport. Lastly, Finch has been posed in a way which allows readers/viewers to see her wedding ring. The ring in plain sight functions as an icon of heteronormativity. Any number of other poses could have been used which would have kept this symbol of heterosexual matrimony out of plain sight, and yet this subtle reference offers visual proof that Finch is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is normal.

One of the unexpected findings of this analysis is the high number of passive photos of both women and men found in *ESPN the Magazine*. Given the methods and results that previous researchers have used in coding subjects, this finding counters the trend of portraying male athletes as active. Verbs largely define sport, and *Sports Illustrated* largely captures the actions of those verbs on its covers featuring active and skilled

male athletes. We can only speculate the reasons for *ESPN the Magazine's* editorial choices, and suggest that the magazine has shown more of a tendency to mirror celebrity culture, thus highlighting a preference to promote masculine personalities. The image discussed here of baseball player Miguel Cabrera on a boat with two bikini-clad women was coded as passive in this study, but a critical reading of the overall scene accompanying this image is suggestive of an increased emphasis by the media in using male athletes to portray enticing fantasy lifestyles. This is consistent with similar popular images which mesh "neatly with the feeling of a locker room culture that affirms the centrality of men" (Messner & Cooky, 2010, p. 24). While additional research is warranted, this study suggests that unlike their female counterparts, even when represented in posed and passive positions, male athletes on these magazine covers are still overwhelmingly portrayed in ways which support idealized hegemonic images of masculinity.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to market research, the circulation for *Sports Illustrated* in 2011 reached 3,178,760 while *ESPN the Magazine* garnered 2,109,547 subscribers (Audit Bureau, 2011). The reach of these magazines is all the more powerful when one considers that both have considerable Internet presences and often feature the covers on their websites. This means that these images have a global reach. As this analysis has documented, both *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* reveal signs of another shift where a higher percentage of males are shown on magazine covers than ever previously documented, while female representation has declined. This is an important situation, as Kane (1988, p. 59) argues the media, including the global media, serve to "reflect and shape — some would even argue create — attitudes and values about ourselves and others". By this logic, it is not difficult to imagine how these magazines affect societal perceptions and attitudes (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991).

The exclusion of females on the covers could create the sense in young women and girls that they do not belong in sports. On the rare occasion where a female is selected for a cover, she is frequently portrayed within normative feminine frames, or as a sexualized object, instilling the perception that when females are in sport, they have to conform to these stereotypes as well. Of course, the implications are not solely for women, as men can observe these same images through a lens that confirms and justifies their place atop the hierarchy of athletic and societal dominance. That is, by seeing so many active and/or celebrated males on magazine covers and so few (active) females, males may feel athletically superior to females and entitled to rule the world of sport, leaving females as a subservient class of athletes. In the current state of sport media, women receive practically no coverage on sport magazine covers, on *Sportscenter* or within local news coverage (Messner & Duncan, 2005; Messner & Cooky, 2010). Just as disconcerting is that the textbooks used to teach future sports journalists promote the notion that men belong in sport and as media producers while women remain as outsiders (Hardin, 2006). This analysis of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* corroborates findings of other recent studies (Duncan & Messner,

2005; Messner & Cooky, 2010) in positing that women's sport coverage in traditional US media outlets is unquestionably declining. Furthermore, women continue to be framed in ways which downplay their athleticism (refer to the critical reading of the Jennie Finch *Sports Illustrated* cover, above). Thanks to these recent studies, one can more fully observe that the systemic annihilation of women's sport coverage identified decades ago continues across traditional media. The question now becomes: how can this course change?

Righting the course will require a grassroots effort, with pressure emanating from a variety of sources and places (Messner & Cooky, 2010). Clearly, a push must be made to promote more equitable treatment of men and women in sport journalism textbooks and an increased presence of women within the profession itself in order to achieve the ideal of equitable journalistic coverage (Hardin, 2006). The former will teach future sports writers and editors that the current levels of coverage are unacceptable, and are indicative of neither substantial sport participation rates nor the considerable contributions women continue to make in sports. And while caution should be expressed in "assuming women reporters will necessarily cover sports differently from the ways that men do, there is some evidence that women sports reporters are less likely to cover women athletes in disrespectful ways, and more likely to advocate expanding the coverage of women's sports" (Messner & Cooky, 2010, p. 27). Much as with coaches and administrators of sport organizations themselves, committed media producers (regardless of gender) have the power to shift the perception of male dominance in athletics and challenge masculine hegemony by promoting more and better coverage of female athletes.

Clearly, an increase in the amount of coverage is not effective unless that coverage significantly changes from its current form. Of equal importance, then, is shifting focus away from feminizing and sexualizing images of the female athlete. Public pressure should be placed upon media outlets and producers by fans demanding that female athletes be presented as *athletes*, not just feminized or (hetero)sexualized objects. This will be exceptionally difficult, especially when one considers the popularity of such representations as *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue and other sexually charged covers. And yet, as Messner and Cooky (2010) argue, calling for better coverage of women's sport represents a fresh way to think about what diverse audiences want — thus creating a new "demand". While difficult, it would be immensely powerful to move from a proverbial "worldwide leader in sports" to a global leader in justice and equality.

## FIRST AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Adam Martin currently attends the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky (USA), where he is working towards a Master's Degree in Sports Leadership. The Covering Women's Sport study started as an independent study project at his undergraduate institution (Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA) and was subsequently presented at an undergraduate research conference before being further developed into its present form. Set to graduate with his M.S. in 2013, Adam will pursue a terminal degree with the intent to teach at college level.

## REFERENCES

- Audit Bureau of Circulations. (2011) Consumer magazine circulation averages. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/magtitlesearch.asp> [Accessed 17th July 2012].
- Birrell, S. & Theberge, N. (1994) Ideological constraints of women in sport. In M. Costa and S. Guthrie, (eds.), *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (323-376).ampaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Bishop, R. (2003) Missing in action: Feature coverage of women's sport in Sports Illustrated. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 27: 184-194.
- Curry, T. (1991) Fraternal bonding in the locker room: A profeminist analysis of talk about competition and women. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8(2): 119-135.
- Duncan, M. C. (1990) Sports photographs and sexual difference: Images from the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 7: 22-43.
- Duncan M. & Messner M. (2005, July) Gender in televised sports: News and highlight shows, 1989-2004. Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.aafpla.org/9arr/ResearchReports/tv2004.pdf> [Accessed 10th February 2012].
- Fink, J., & Kensicki, L. (2002) An imperceptible difference: Visual and textual constructions of femininity in Sports Illustrated and Sports Illustrated for Women. *Mass Communication & Society* 5(3): 317-339.
- Hardin, M., Dodd, J. & Lauffer, K. (2006) Passing it on: Reinforcement of male hegemony in sports journalism textbooks. *Mass Communication and Society* 9: 429-446.
- Kane, M. J. (1988) Media coverage of the female athlete before, during, and after title IX: Sports Illustrated revisited. *Journal of Sport Management* 2: 87-99.
- Kuhn, A. (1985) *The power of the image: Essays on representation and sexuality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lumpkin, A., & Williams, L. D. (1991) An analysis of *Sports Illustrated* feature articles, 1954-1987. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8: 16-32.
- Markula, P. (Ed.). (2009) *Olympic women and the media*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Messner M., & Cooky, C. (2010, June) Gender in televised sports: news and highlights shows, 1989-2009. University of Southern California Center for Feminist Research. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/cfr/html/documents/tvsports.pdf> [Accessed 10th March 2012].