

Women, Team Sports, and the WNBA: Playing Like a Girl

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June 21, 1997, marked the inaugural season of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Although a century of women's basketball—including some unsuccessful professional leagues—preceded the WNBA, this time promised to be different. The official slogan of the WNBA, "We Got Next," assured basketball fans of not only a televised team sports league during the lagging summer off-season of the National Basketball Association (NBA) but also a future for women's basketball, complete with high-powered demonstrations of athletic skill and competition. In 1999, following the debut of the WNBA, the U.S. media enthusiastically covered the victory of the U.S. women's team in World Cup Soccer, and the Williams sisters, Venus and Serena, made (and continue to make) headlines for both their superior tennis playing and their fashion politics. It is an expected part of middle-class suburban life in the United States for young girls to participate in team sports such as softball and soccer, and the female athletes competing for the United States in the 2004 Olympics had many more victories—both as individuals and on teams—than the male athletes. It is clear that women's sports are no longer a peripheral event but rather an important part of mainstream culture in the United States.

Yet, the politics surrounding female athletes—as well as the coverage of female athletes in the media—are framed within conventional discourses of the sexualized body. The complexities surrounding popular understandings of women's team sports and the behavior of female athletes on the field became clear when champion soccer team member Brandi Chastain caused a media uproar when she ripped off her jersey after scoring the deciding goal in the 1999 USA World Cup series. The action shots of strong, sweaty female bodies, simply by their sheer corporeality, challenge dominant masculine conventions involving sport. This challenge to the clearly male-dominated realm of team sports requires complicated cultural negotiations by both the leagues and its sponsors in order to establish that professional

women's team sports such as soccer and basketball are a "legitimate" sport—and that the athletes themselves are "legitimate" women. So for women, team sports have had to also situate themselves within a long and conflicted history about women and sport. Part of this task has been to adopt strategies intended to assuage sponsors and fans that their sport, while professional and athletic, was not overly "masculine," which is to say, not lesbian "occupied." The WNBA, for instance, has strategically represented itself in such a way as to counteract the American public's fears about the players—and thus, by association, the sport—being homosexual. Fans and sponsors are encouraged to see basketball as a sport where not only those women labeled as "deviant" by dominant ideology could play, but as a game played by those who followed normative conventions of heterosexual femininity. On another plane of sexuality, when female athletes' heterosexuality is assumed, they are often critiqued as overtly sexual—especially when depicted in the media in a provocative manner.

While femininity and athleticism are upheld as incompatible by cultural discourses, another dimension linked to the affirmation of female athletes and women's team sport is informed by dominant racial narratives surrounding the Black athletic body. This is most evident in the case of the WNBA. Within the complicated strategies that have worked to establish the WNBA as a legitimate and profitable professional athletic organization, a curious shift in the politics of race and gender that surround sport has occurred. This shift has taken place in the inevitable comparison between the WNBA and the NBA—a comparison that is made ostensibly on the grounds of athletic ability but is really much more about the intersection of race and gender in professional sports. As Michael Dyson, bell hooks, and others have noted (Dyson, 1993; Hoberman, 1997; hooks, 1994), dominant narratives of race have informed the public understanding of the NBA since its inception, where the Black players of the NBA have often been characterized according to their "natural" athletic prowess, while the White athletes have been publicly understood (and valorized) as the "smarter" and more intellectual players. Because of the focus on race in the NBA, and perhaps because it is a sport that has been professionally all male for most of its history, masculinity has been an obvious, and thus unremarked upon, category. Rather, categorizing players has functioned on the level of what *kind* of men the players were—the cerebral "smart" White players or the incorrigible, athletic Black players.

In the case of basketball, the arrival of the WNBA has shifted this perspective a bit. Concepts of race and gender are now simultaneously employed as explanatory frameworks for figuring out who, and what, professional basketball players are and should be. While it is clear that women participate in athletics and are skilled, their very participation in the cultural realm of sport signifies a challenge to athletic masculinity. Women's professional team sports have thus been defined as cultural arenas that are primarily about *gender*. In other words, in the cultural context of late twentieth-century U.S. society, the question that is consistently asked by the press and the public is: what *kind* of women play professional team sports? On what terms and conditions does the cultural representation of these female players occur? There has been much media hoopla about the way in which the WNBA "transcends" gender, simply because it is a professional arena that *allows* for female athletes. Professional women's basketball, it seems, is now considered "equal" because corporations and advertisers have found that, 27 years after the passing of Title IX, there is a market audience for female basketball players. Since community membership increasingly means good market share, the WNBA is now part of the

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basketball community. Similarly, the U.S. women's Olympic softball team is part of this community, proving through athletic skill that gender doesn't "matter" in quite the way it once did. However, while there has been a growing presence and perhaps even acceptance of women in sports, much of the rhetoric framing media depictions of female athletes revolves around the relation between the commodification of sport and female empowerment, working to further highlight the gendered dimension around women and sports.

TEAM WORK: THE PROBLEM OF FEMALE TEAM SPORTS

Within the frame of the media, the bodies of female athletes are understood and legitimated first and foremost as being about femininity rather than athleticism. This is visible in some of the current popular controversies around the sexualized depiction of female athletes in popular men's magazines and Web sites. While certainly male athletes are also (increasingly) objectified in the media, the character of that objectification is quite different when it comes to female athletes. For instance, the controversies around three-time Olympic veteran Amanda Beard's choice to pose along with other Olympians on the 2004 cover of *FHM* magazine wearing only a white string bikini, where critics claimed she was denigrating the sport, were about the apparent incompatibilities between the sexualized body and the athletic body. These discourses also frame social understandings of women's team sports around the gendered characteristic of the athletes. In other words, despite the rhetoric of "equality," it is precisely conventional narratives of *femininity* that give women team sports cultural legitimation as all-female team sports. These conventional narratives of femininity work to mediate the tensions between traditional representations of femininity and the cultural ideal that values men's athleticism over that of women's.

This is not to say that women have not been valued as athletes. However, the American public's fascination with female athletes has almost always centered on individual athletes—tennis players, professional golfers, figure skaters, and gymnasts (Chisholm, 1999a; Chisholm, 1999b). These sports demonstrate the agility and elegance "natural" to women and, although athleticism is clearly a major aspect of these sports, the individual stars are known, culturally at least, more for their "feminine" attributes: self-sacrifice, glamour, grace. Indeed, the public recognition of individual female athletes attends much more to their feminine beauty and objectified status as particular kinds of commodities than to their athletic skill. And, if individual women athletes are not naturalized as sexual, feminine beings, it is usually because they are not, in fact, women at all but rather little girls. In the last two decades, sports such as tennis, figure skating, and gymnastics can hardly be called "*women's*" sports: Tara Lipinski won the Olympic gold medal in figure skating when she was fourteen years old, there was not a single individual over the age of twenty on the entire American Olympic team of female gymnasts, and tennis superstars are often still teenagers. In contrast, team sports usually feature *women*—in the WNBA, for instance, the players are required to complete their college eligibility or be twenty-one years old. Hence, they can acquire their status as role models for little girls—an important feature of professional team sports in the United States—precisely because, unlike Tara Lipinski or Carly Patterson, they are *not* little girls. In fact, it is the maturity of the players that is often lauded in the press. The focus on

maturity accomplishes at least two different things: one, it establishes the players as experienced professionals, not little girls who will, simply because of physical development, grow too large at any moment to be a superstar gymnast or ice skater. Two, it also establishes the WNBA players as different from the NBA players—the maturity of the WNBA is in direct contrast to the “immaturity” of the NBA.

DIFFERENCES FROM MEN'S TEAM SPORTS

Professional sports, and especially professional men's basketball, is often highlighted as a cultural space in which racist practices that formulate American cultural life are transcended—indeed, even obliterated—because it is seen as a “post-racial” arena for integration (Hoberman, 1997).¹ In fact, it is the idea of the NBA as an “interracial theater” that has allowed for an insidious kind of opening. The focus on the “difference” between Black and White players has helped to reinvestigate biological racism. Within this “interracial theater” of the NBA, many of the fantasies and fears of White audiences about Black men are played out. The NBA exploits and exoticizes the racist stereotypes of the Black menace even as it domesticates this cultural figure.

The media discourse that surrounds professional basketball has often pointed out the basketball arena as a place free of racial tensions, a triumph of post-Civil Rights American culture. This kind of denial about the racial tensions that have always characterized professional sports in the United States makes the racist argument about biological difference between Black and White athletes all the more credible. The fact that Black athletes dominate the NBA easily translates (in current cultural politics) to the “fact” that professional basketball must therefore not be a racist organization. Because there are ostensibly no cultural barriers for African Americans to become professional athletes, there needs to be some kind of explanatory framework for the athletic prowess of the Black players. The explanation, therefore, for both skill and bad behavior, must be biology. Those same genetic propensities that allow for the high jumps and superior athletic skill also “cause” uncontrollable and recalcitrant social behavior on the court.²

While conventional narratives of *femininity* work to give women's team sports such as the WNBA cultural legitimacy as an all-female team sport, the consolidation of the Black male athlete as culturally legitimate, especially in the NBA, derives from the players' ability to manage their raced bodies in the face of a predominantly White organizational culture. The dominant understanding of the bodies of Black athletes works to both commodify and naturalize these bodies. The iconization and image of Michael Jordan, placed on everything from cologne to long distance companies to hamburgers, continues to stand in stark contrast to the image of someone like Ron Artest, involved recently in a physical brawl with fans so violent that the basketball game had to be called. Where Jordan is used to confirm the successful use of the Black athlete as a commodity, Artest both affirms and disrupts

¹This is precisely the reason why Hoberman criticizes Black intellectual scrutiny of the NBA. Hoberman argues that there is little scrutiny because basketball has been seen as a positive arena for self-definition and empowerment for young Black men. While his is a compelling argument, this chapter does not present such a view; rather, we are scrutinizing the media coverage of Black players in the NBA.

²We can see that this is clearly about race; we never find the media speculating on what particular *White* gene must be present to explain the skill of, say, hockey players or golfers.

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assumptions about the naturalized Black body (Dyson, 1993). In much the same way as the unruly racial politics of the NBA function to solidify the moral status of the gender politics that shape the WNBA, Dennis Rodman, one of the most controversial players in the NBA, notably known for his tie-dyed hair colors, tattoos, and many body piercings, through his defiance, stabilizes the image of Jordan and serves to contain the potential threat of his Black body. This shaping of Black male athletes into objects dilutes the potential threat that they carry simply by *being* Black male bodies. It is clear in the media that more recently other players in the NBA, through their challenge to authority and defiance, have "needed" precisely this kind of domestication. Indeed, the rhetoric of "poor sportsmanship" that shapes the media discourse of the NBA, along with "bad-boy" behavior, the violence and aggression that is increasingly part of the game, and the presence of cultural bodily markings such as tatoos and body piercing signify Blackness and menace. The underlying subtext of the "ego problems" of the NBA players, occasionally young men straight out of high school who are made instant millionaires, is that these are men from the "inner cities" (another code word for race in U.S. cultural politics) and that they are both natural athletes and natural thugs. As such, the cultural arena of the NBA is about normative masculinity, Whiteness, respectability, and, perhaps most importantly, class.

The threat posed by Black players in the NBA is thus understood culturally as one of a lack of respect, an unwillingness—and implicitly, an incapability—of accepting authority. In order to assuage the challenge posed by some NBA players, the marketing and manufacturing networks have worked assiduously to construct the more well-known athletes as commodities. The threat that players such as Artest, Alan Iverson, and others pose is diluted by their commodification, by making them into things that one can buy or observe. However, this kind of marketing is precarious because players such as Sprewell, suspended by the NBA for attacking the Warriors' head coach in 1997, and Rodman are explicitly *needed* by the NBA as particular kinds of commodities—players such as these offer an attractive "edge" for youth marketing. Hence, the threat posed by unruly players must be balanced in a way that maintains the public titillation caused by the defiant Black male body while not disrupting the broad marketability of the league.

Interestingly, the positioning of the Black male athlete as a commodity—and thus as a passive object—is a curious reversal of the way that women's bodies have been traditionally objectified. As bell hooks (1994) commented, "it has taken contemporary commodification of Blackness to teach the world that this perceived threat, whether real or symbolic, can be diffused by a process of fetishization that renders the Black masculine 'menace' feminine through a process of patriarchal objectification" (p. 110).

The cultural fear of the Black male body is diluted by shaping Black male athletes as commodities, even as this fear is legitimated by what is ostensibly seen and experienced on the court. The WNBA occupies a position in stark contrast to the NBA, which is increasingly scrutinized by the press as a group of spoiled, ungrateful, violent Black men invading the minds of innocent White middle-class boys and men. The WNBA, with its "wholesome" players who are grateful that they have a job at all, becomes the respectable—and respectful—player in this particular game. In short, the gendering of the WNBA has functioned culturally to trump the racial politics of the NBA. The media has recently focused on the idea of women's basketball as representing a "purer" form of the game—the WNBA apparently demonstrates the way the game "should" be played. The rhetoric of purity is deeply embedded

in a discourse of morality—the female players of the WNBA function as morally superior athletes in comparison to the NBA.

So, ironically, the racist discourse that shapes the media construction of the NBA works to offer a more positive picture of the WNBA. Of course, the same discourses that shape conventions of Black masculinity have also constructed damaging representations of Black women. However, despite the overwhelming African-American presence in the league, at present the WNBA has been characterized more in terms of normative femininity—maternal, moral, collaborative—than according to dominant representations of Black women, which in other arenas have emphasized sexuality and amorality. While it can be argued that the figure of the trash-talking “bad boy” in the NBA has a specific cultural purpose, there is no racialized “bad-girl” equivalent in the WNBA—at least not yet. The racial politics of the NBA that represent the Black male body as naturalized and dangerous also serve as the negative screen against which the WNBA creates its positive gender commodity image.

In an interesting discursive move, the naturalized bodies of the female athletes of the WNBA have been retrained to represent values more often associated with masculinist team sports, allowing talent to reign over glamour. The athletes of the NBA, on the other hand, are increasingly objectified, shaped as individual stars, their bodies transformed into objects through their relentless commodification. The WNBA and the NBA work off each other: the categories of race and gender that are so crucial to the self-definition of the leagues are mutually constitutive. The media portrayals of the NBA represent the Black players as potentially dangerous and menacing, allowing for the WNBA to construct itself in positive opposition to these racial politics. And, in the women's league, dominant conventions of gender function on the surface to threaten the NBA, but these politics implicitly serve to contain the unruly Blackness of the NBA, stabilizing the league by helping to police the “greed” and the bodies of unruly Black men of the NBA. With the racial and gender boundaries tightened and clarified, the safely domesticated Black male bodies can become the symbols that advertisers want, and the female players emerge as appropriate role model spokespersons for the league.

But because the masculinist assumptions of team sports challenge the individualist and moralist ideology that constructs sports such as figure skating and gymnastics, the women athletes in the WNBA have had to manage a contradictory set of cultural images. Strategies are needed to reassure fans that although they are not dancing gracefully over the ice in designer outfits, professional female basketball players are in fact feminine beings. And while for some, the WNBA is a shining example of the transcendence of gender in professional sports, a place where, finally, gender does not “matter,” it is just as clear that gender matters tremendously in much the same way as the NBA is often lauded as being a positive example of integration for precisely the same reasons that it *remains* a racist organization, the WNBA is seen as a positive arena for women to be “equal” to men—even while it is clear that it is the athletes’ definition as *women* that legitimates the sport.

FASHIONABLE PLAYERS: FEMALE ATHLETES, SEXUALITY, AND GLAMOUR

The traditional trappings of femininity—fashion, motherhood, beauty, morality—characterize the players of women team sports. For example, on the official Web site of the WNBA, alongside features that list game schedules, highlights from previous

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games, and new sponsorship partners, there is a section called "WNBA Unveils Uniform." This section claims that the WNBA "injects fresh perspective into the creation of its basketball uniforms," and there is information about the decisions made for the official WNBA uniforms: Should they wear dresses? Tunics over shorts? Unitards? Or "skorts" (skirts/shorts)? There is also detailed information about the materials and colors used for the final choice of uniforms (which, incidentally, was shirts and shorts). Finally, there is a section where fans can vote on their favorite uniform, with pictures of both the home and away uniforms (WNBA Official Web site, 1999). Clearly, this particular section of the Web site contributes to a dominant ideology that women are overly concerned with clothing and fashion. There is no comparable section on the Web site of the NBA, and, while not surprising, the presence of this feature tells us something about the various ways in which the players and the institution of the WNBA function to shore up dominant notions and ideologies about the construction of womanhood.

Most media discourses surrounding coverage of female athletes are shaped around the connection between athletic recognition and legitimate femininity. For instance, the fact that most female tennis players still wear skirts rather than the more comfortable, albeit less feminine, shorts tends to also be discussed in light of this connection. Consider this online column in *Slate Magazine*:

Tennis's designated sexpot, Anna Kournikova, wore shorts in last year's U.S. Open. But most don't. This is likely because looking cute on the court (and giving a little panty flash now and then) is a way for female athletes to rally fan support, and more importantly, increase the value of their endorsement contracts. (Kournikova doesn't have to worry about increasing her stock as a sex symbol, which is why she can afford to wear shorts. (Truitt, 2001)

In discussing the backless yellow spandex dress worn by tennis player Venus Williams in the 2000 U.S. Open, this same article asked:

Would Venus Williams have scored a \$40 million endorsement contract from Reebok—the highest ever for a female athlete—if she dressed in the baggy shorts of a WNBA or LPGA player? Unlikely. Her earning power depends mainly on winning matches, but looking stunning in a tight yellow dress helps. (Truitt, 2001, para.)

Clearly, given the threat that is posed by paying women to play and perform in sporting events and thus recognizing them as professionals, naturalizing them as "true women" is a predictable strategy.

The fact that some athletes also model is something that is emphasized by reporters. The modeling career of Lisa Leslie, a player for the Los Angeles Sparks, is the consistent focus of the articles that feature her:

The worlds of hoops and haute couture seem galaxies apart to most people. Not Lisa Leslie. All poise and confidence, the Olympic gold medalist and aspiring supermodel is equally comfortable dribbling down the lane in a sweaty fury and breezing down the runway in four inch heels and an Armani evening gown. (Huntington, 1996, p. 50)

It is clear that it is absolutely crucial for Leslie to be "equally" comfortable in either the athlete or model mode—it is precisely this easy movement between the two that helps legitimate her status as a star athlete. As Leslie herself puts it: "That's what I call my Wonder Woman Theory" . . . When I'm playing, I'll sweat and talk trash. However, off the court, I'm lipstick, heels and short skirts. I'm very feminine, mild-mannered, and sensitive." The rest of the article is quite bald-faced about this particular strategy, calling the "sudden" fact that "women's hoops are vogue, chic and feminine" as "all part of the plan" (Marks, 1997, p. 46). A similar argument was made by Australian soccer team player Amy Taylor following the release of the infamous "nude Matildas 2000 Calendar" (Matildas is the name given to the Australian all-women soccer team), featuring nude shots of 12 of the players on the team. On the official Matildas Web site the team members justified the nude calendar by saying, "We just find that we're not getting the media attention or the publicity that we deserve and we needed to do something to lift our profile" (Matildas, 2005). Taylor, who was featured on the cover of the calendar, said, "We wanted to prove we're not all butch lesbians. We are attractive, feminine girls who play soccer" (O'Keefe, 2000). As if the calendar was not a strong enough indication of the athletes' femininity, the Matilda's official Web site runs a banner stating, "The Matildas: The New Fashion in Football." These practices are clearly about establishing the players' commitment to being feminine, and they are an explicit argument against the history of female athletes, who were so often criticized for their distinctly unfeminine qualities—such as muscularity and athletic skill (Cahn, 1998; Schulze, 1990).

Indeed, the threat of women participating in the sporting world, explicitly acknowledged by the Matildas, is by no means a new one. Cahn (1998) argued that the stereotype of the manly, lesbian athlete has worked to shape not only female competitors themselves, but also sports organizations, funding sources, and the overall popularity of women's sports. The most common strategy employed by athletic organizations to overcome this stereotype is to reassure audiences and fans that women involved in sports are indeed "women"—meaning, of course, that they are heterosexual. As Cahn (1998) pointed out, "The lesbian stereotype exert[s] pressure on athletes to demonstrate their femininity and heterosexuality, viewed as one and the same" (p. 76). Not surprisingly, it is in those sports that most resemble masculinized athletics (for example, soccer, softball, or hockey), and those that have the greatest need to attract a paying audience, that the fear of and anxiety over lesbianism are most prominent. Because these sports are culturally defined as masculine, and because there is an easy cultural slippage between "masculine women" and lesbian identity, strategies are needed by the players in order to re-define and recast the sport as feminine or womanly. For example, "sex appeal" is translated as "flex appeal" in the context of female body building, female tennis players are often depicted as "playing for" their love interest in the stands, and female professional basketball and soccer players are shown as fashion models and mothers (Messner, 2002; Schulze, 1990).

Intriguingly, stories about the lesbian following of the WNBA have shaped the media discourse and promotion strategies of the league. As *Newsweek* put it in September of 1997, the first season of the WNBA,

The league also has another, less trumpeted core constituency. Though TV broadcasts pan moms with their kids, plenty of women come on their own. Says Sarah Pettit, editor of *Out* magazine, 'Next to the 'Ellen' episode, this is

the biggest news in the lesbian community all year long. If there's one thing lesbians are talking about, it's who's on the bench and who's on the floor. (Leland, Rosenberg, VanBoven, & Gegax, 1997, p. 57)

Not surprisingly, the WNBA does not acknowledge any gay following; Rick Welts, chief marketing officer for both the NBA and the WNBA, replied when asked about a lesbian audience, "I'm not aware of that . . . We don't take attendance that way. The league does not discriminate" (Leland, et al., 1997, p. 57).

Although Welts uses antidiscriminatory rhetoric as a slick way to deflect questions about the public awareness of a lesbian following of the WNBA, a more successful strategy to reassure fans of the players' heterosexuality has been to focus on maternity. When WNBA star Sheryl Swoopes of the Houston Comets became pregnant the first season of the league, it proved to be a great advantage to her as a player and a golden marketing opportunity for the league. When asked about Swoopes, Welts said, "We embrace maternity" (Leland, et al., 1997, p. 57). Her pregnancy became a press bonanza, with soft news stories about maternity in general, balancing baby with basketball, and the generous sacrifice of Swoopes' husband, Eric Jackson, to stay home with the baby. Rosie O'Donnell, an extremely public WNBA fan, was exuberant in her praise of Swoopes, explicitly because of her maternity:

People go to NBA games and they can figure out pretty fast that Michael Jordan is the most valuable player because he's the best. WNBA fans don't think that way. Our MVP was Sheryl Swoopes, not because she led the league in scoring or acrobatics, but because she had a baby and six weeks later, she was back on the court playing basketball. (as cited in Whiteside, 1998, p. 3)

She continued, "Sheryl gets ready to go in the game and every mom in the crowd stands up and cheers: 'Hey Sheryl! Go girl! Can you believe how good she looks! She had a baby! Go Sheryl! You still nursing? Sheryl, you look great!'" When Swoopes plays, the camera continually returns to shots of the sideline where the baby and father watch the game.

Although Swoopes may be the most recognizable mother in the WNBA because of the intense scrutiny of her activities, other maternal players receive attention because of their decisions to have children. For example, on the official WNBA Web site, there is a section called "Ask Olympia" that allows visitors to the Web site to write in questions to Utah's Olympia Scott-Richardson. A full three fourth of these questions asked about the player's recent pregnant status, what sex the baby would be, what her name would be, and whether or not Scott-Richardson would take her baby on tour with her (WNBA Official Web site, 1999). This focus on maternity resonates with another dominant cultural assumption about women: that they are, above all, interested in becoming mothers. But unlike the younger female athletes such as 14-year-old golfer Michelle Wie or 16-year-old gymnast Carly Patterson, WNBA players do not merely embody the promise of *future* motherhood—many of them are already mothers, leaving no doubt to their feminine nature. Not only do these kinds of media strategies provide what seems to be ironclad evidence of the players' heterosexuality, they also establish the WNBA as a family-oriented, moral game, or as *Newsweek* put it, the WNBA is "the good apple in the increasingly rotting barrel of professional sports" (Leland, et al., 1997, p. 57).

Establishing the WNBA as a sporting event for the family is an important discursive move. The league is often lauded as a "hoop dream come true for millions of American girls" and is explicitly marketed as a sport the whole family can watch together. Moreover, the long-held dominant ideology that women are "morally superior" to men finds its way to the WNBA in the way that the women athletes are seen as less corrupted, whether by power or money, than NBA athletes. The players of the WNBA often talk about their teams as their "family"; as Cynthia Cooper of the Houston Comets said, "Families are very, very important to me, both my own family and the family that I have on the court, because we did become a family during the season" (Whiteside, 1998, p. 25). Prior to its demise in 2003, the professional soccer league WUSA followed a similar strategy by openly targeting families. In the words of Shaun May, the league's director of public relations, "The so-called soccer mom market is what we're going after" (Drehs, 2001, para.). In the 2003 season the WUSA teamed up with Maytag's "Search for Outstanding Soccer Moms" contest in which four semi-finalists would win a trip for four to the WUSA Founders Cup 2003 Championship game, and the National Finalist/Grand Prize winner would receive a 2003 Hyundai Santa Fe Sport Utility Vehicle, as well as a Maytag Appliance Suite, including a washer, gas dryer, dishwasher, Gemini double oven, and refrigerator. Mothers and families were definitely the target of this campaign. Despite having folded in 2003 following three years of playing and a reported \$100 million in fiscal losses, the players of the WUSA and of the more successful WNBA embody a different type of sportsmanship. As one columnist put it, "For women's basketball to become a major sport in America, as opposed to a profitable one like arena football, something is going to have to be offered other than just pure skill. That something should be, and in fact will have to be, a different attitude, a purer sense of the sport, than the men deliver" (Kallam, 1999).

This "different attitude" resides in the bodies of the female players, indeed, in the bodies of the players, bodies that are more moral, more pure, less likely to succumb to temptation, and less corrupt than male bodies. Simply, the bodies of the WNBA players are the "purer sense of the sport." The discourse of the family and maternity play into a dual construction, where the family-oriented players of the WNBA and the former WUSA offer wholesome good fun and healthy competition to their fans, as opposed to the lone mavericks of male teams such as the NBA, seemingly out only for themselves and their own personal glory.

But, while the discourse of family and maternity legitimate women's professional team sports, they also work themselves into arguments for the minimal popularity of all women team sports. In fact, media discourse surrounding the minimal attendance and TV ratings of women's sports compared to men's sports justifies this discrepancy by arguing that it is precisely the gendered aspect of the event that works to alienate potential fans, men and women alike. In an interview published in the online version of the U.S. National Soccer Team Players' Monthly, Kevin McGeehan, Director of Media Relations for the Johnstown Chiefs noted:

The reason that you have not seen men's supporters groups at women's games, U.S. or WUSA, is simple: women's soccer has never marketed itself as simply "soccer." It has always been about the women's movement, or giving six-year-old girls' soccer role models, or nice, clean family fun. I am not against these things, per se, but I don't really want my sports mixed with feminism or screaming six-year-olds. ("Round not oval," 2003)

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It is precisely this denigrating and condescending rhetoric that works to both normalize male sports as "real" sports, dedicated to the game, and women's sports as more of a distraction, one more event among many in a woman's life. In other words, the qualities of femininity so necessary for the cultural legitimation of women's professional team sports become the site on which discourses about sexuality, morality, and respectability converge.

SHOWING SOME RESPECT

Although clearly the feminine body of the WNBA player is naturalized through a variety of discourses and strategies, it is also the case that the players are not objectified in the way that women's bodies have been objectified traditionally. Again, they are constantly referred to in the press as "mature women," and the play itself shapes the bodies of the players as active subjects rather than passive objects, team players rather than prima donnas. Ann Meyers, a former All-American basketball player and currently a coach, has pointed out:

Basketball is basketball, regardless of gender, race, or age... The women's edge is they do the fundamentals. It's a great game. The men's game has gotten out of hand a little bit. They carry the ball, they travel. They've gotten away from fundamentals. The taunting, the fights, the trash talking. I don't think there's anyplace for it in the game. (as cited in Salter, 1996, p. 110)

This characterizes the NBA as a realm where "taunting" and "trash talking" works to solidify the purity of the WNBA, even as it also functions to construct the NBA implicitly in terms of race politics.

Moreover, the purity of the WNBA is recognized through the gratitude of the players. Before the WNBA and the American Basketball League (ABL) were established, the only place where women could play professional basketball was overseas (Whiteside, 1998).³ The players of the WNBA are grateful to *have* a professional organization in the United States, and they consistently demonstrate this gratitude to their fans. Traditionally, gratitude, like self-sacrifice, has been a characteristic of femininity. Indeed, the players of the NBA, in contrast, are nonconformist and certainly not grateful, as they heckle fans and attack their coaches. In an ironic twist, the female teams of the WNBA are perhaps organized according to the "old-boys" school of professional sport, where the players have a place, know that place, and are simply grateful that someone has offered them that place. The NBA, on the other hand, is increasingly unable—and the players unwilling—to stabilize this kind of hierarchy.

Despite the gestures toward conformity displayed by WNBA athletes, the league *does* offer new potentials and conditions for shifting dominant understandings of femininity. Journalist Marks (1997) wrote about the WNBA:

The new-age prototype for Cosmo Woman has (finally!) turned the page from bikini-clad babes with big, er, smiles to women in baggy shorts, ponytails and

³The ABL folded in 1998 due to financial difficulties. The WNBA players, if they played professional ball at all, would play for teams overseas. See Whiteside (1998) for more discussion of the players' careers overseas.

killer jump shots. Meet the new millennium of supermodels, led by Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo and Sheryl Swoopes. Hope you're buying, 'cause the WNBA is definitely selling. (p. 46)

This article continues to claim that the WNBA is "attempting to change the public perception of what femininity really is"—a tall order, clearly, but one that all-female, professional team sports league may have a better shot at than, say, academics or Britney Spears. The play on the word "model" in Marks' statement about the WNBA becoming "the new millennium of supermodels" suggests that the American public is eager for strong, aggressive, competitive female role models. The idea of modeling for girls and young women has been both a lucrative marketing strategy and, it seems, a realistic goal for the WNBA players. For example, a Nike television advertisement shown on Lifetime depicted Cynthia Cooper of the Houston Comets, who simply said to the camera:

We get out in the malls and we're laughing and joking and I actually took a picture with the first person—she hasn't sent it to me yet—with the first little girl that I saw with my jersey. It was awesome. *It was awesome.* I wanted to cry. She came up to me and she said 'would you please sign my autograph?' I said, 'Can I take a picture with you, please?' It was great. It was amazing. (Nike television Advertisement, 1998)

The ad ends with a stylized black and white photograph of Cooper, with the words "I can inspire" merging with the words "I can aspire" (Nike Advertisement, 1998). This ad is typical for Nike, a company that has found role-modeling for young girls to be an emotive and profitable strategy. Indeed, it is promising that girls and young women can witness a public validation of women who do not quite fit normative standards of femininity—that there is, in short, a public role model for young girls who look and act differently from the current Miss America.

But contemporary discourses surrounding female empowerment are constructed primarily in and through commercial culture. Gender representations of women in the media are driven by the commercial market, and revenue is generated through tried and true formulae so that normative conventions of femininity are the surest bet for networks. While both celebrating and producing ideologies of female empowerment is media representations of female empowerment demonstrate contradictions in cultural understandings of femininity. The empowerment of female athletes is demonstrated in and through the strong, muscular bodies of female athletes, whose very participation in the traditional male sphere of sports imbues their bodies with significant feminist politics. Yet, as with all representations, empowering representations of female athletes are tricky. So, while it is clear that female athletes' participation in dominant conventions of gender is a prerequisite for their legitimization as athletes, these same conventions work to reduce female athletes to a sex object rather than emphasize the way that they embody athletic achievement and skill. Yet this contradiction—between sexual objectification and athleticism—is actually a false one, as both these constructions of femininity reinforce each other in current manifestations of gender. From The Matilda's nude calendar to the Canadian Women's cross-country team producing a "Nordic Nude" calendar in September 2000, many women team sports and individual athletes have responded to low ratings and minimal social and cultural attention by relying on something that has been historically lucrative: the display of the female body. As one article

becoming comfortable with their bodies, but also for successfully adapting these bodies to succeed in an arena traditionally perceived as the province of men. These female athletes are judged by women, men, and other female athletes alike, for apparently emphasizing their femininity over their athletic skills and for having used the cultural capital of their athletic ability to do so. This underlying discourse implies that the argument is that, rather than being grateful for the opportunity of being allowed to participate in the cultural realm of sport, these unappreciative women clearly lack the ability to represent themselves as any thing other than *woman* and sexual. As one article put it, "Because female athletes receive 80-90% less coverage of their athletic achievement in the print and electronic media than their male counterparts, female athletes who use this opportunity for non-sport exposure allow the media to continue to marginalize the achievements of the female athlete" (Women's Sports Foundation, 2000).

Much in the same way that class politics in the NBA normalizes Black men as incapable of negotiating themselves in a social and economic status other than their *natural* street environment, the underlying narrative here is that women really do not know how to manage their *naturally* sexual bodies in what still is the domain of men. Additionally, the political and cultural significance of the realm of sport is changing, representing both female and male bodies as able to participate in contests of endurance and skill. The display of the athletic body offers a different image from the models in magazines or actors in the media. Commenting on this difference, one article argued, "Olympic swimmer Jenny Thompson says her nearly naked pose in *Sports Illustrated* is a welcome alternative to the ubiquitous images of anorexic women that come at us from Hollywood and Madison Avenue" (Tucker, 2000).

Indeed, as "*girl culture*" emerges as an interesting and necessary site for scholarly study, it seems female team sports are a perfect subject of inquiry. Recent scholarship has focused on those icons that have provided young American girls with role models and inspirations: teen magazines, book series such as the American Girl Series and the stalwart Nancy Drew, and, of course, dolls (Inness, 1998).⁴ Yet, athletes provide a somewhat different model from these traditional icons. Although Mattel has predictably clued into the popularity of sports and young girls by producing a WNBA Barbie (along with a USA Team Soccer Barbie and others), the dolls are obviously different from the real bodies of the players: big (many of the players are over six feet tall), sweaty, and aggressive. The sheer physicality of the sport—a physicality that is so visually different from the way women's bodies are traditionally imaged and imagined—makes it a place where one can conceptualize new conditions of possibility for definitions of the feminine.

Thus, despite the various ways in which professional sports normalize conventional notions of femininity and the politics of gender that both surround and shape them, sports present an opportunity for a disruption of these conventions. The association of power with girls, whatever the source, deserves at least some critical attention. The major sponsors of the professional women's sports, Nike and Reebok, have adopted explicit liberal feminist rhetoric into their advertisements, and although they obviously use this language as a lucrative avenue for selling products, it nonetheless shapes the dominant construction of women athletes.

⁴ And the dolls are not just Barbie anymore (although she remains the best-selling toy in history), but also what Inness (1998) calls "anti-Barbies," the American Girl dolls, "dolls that could teach American history, family values, and self-reliance."

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commenting on female U.S. athletes' provocative appearances put it, "While some feminists fumed over the photos, others held them up as proof of how self-assured women have become" (Litke, 2000). Clearly, the easy dismissal of these representations of empowerment ignores the contradictory narratives shaping most media productions of femininity and, furthermore, works to support the normative conventions of femininity through which female athletes have to negotiate their identities as both women and athletes.

FROM MUSCLES TO SEX

Discourses about race, femininity, and empowerment intersect and are mapped onto popular representation of female athletes. If, in the case of the WNBA, the commodification of the Black male body of the NBA assures the legitimization of the female players as symbols of respectable athletic femininity, that respectability is compromised when female athletes are seen as willingly participating in the objectification of their already *sexualized* bodies. Similarly, where the female athletic body as *feminine* works to evade the threat of being labeled a lesbian, this same body, when voluntarily subjected to the objectification of the camera by posing semicovered or entirely nude, is seen as responsible for minimizing athletic achievement and skill. In other words, the very *femininity* that in the case of the WNBA, for instance, works to legitimate women's basketball as wholesome, pure, and about talent becomes, in the case of female athletes showing off their bodies in magazines such as *Maxim*, *Sports Illustrated*, and others, the site for the constitution of discourses about gender and sexuality. Consider this comment by Wendy Wright of Concerned Women for America in discussing whether female Olympians should pose in magazines:

It's degrading to all women, but there's an added element here. Now these women have earned their spot on the Olympic team, but more than that, it's an honor to represent the United States of America. So they are role models, and more than that, they're ambassadors of the United States. And at this time when American athletes are being told that in Greece, they shouldn't wave the flag too much, because it might set off violent elements, the violent elements aren't set off by the flag. They're more set off by things like a decadent culture. So I think that what these women have done is incredibly irresponsible. (CNBC's Capital Report, 2004)

Here the female athletic body is invested with discourses about sexuality, empowerment, and objectification in ways that render visible the gendered dimensions of popular understandings of the female athlete and further normalize the masculine athletic body as an unremarked-upon category. Indeed, the implication of Wright that somehow the depiction of Amanda Beard's bikini-clad body might inspire a terrorist act is testimony to the deep entrenchment of these categories. In other words, the same reasons that permit a celebration of the female athlete as about empowerment and progress also confront discourses about the female body as overtly sexualized and as such first and foremost feminine, rather than athletic.

The media uproar surrounding female athletes' revealing poses has been framed around the tensions between female empowerment on the one hand, and female objectification on the other. On the one hand, they are celebrated for not only

becoming comfortable with their bodies, but also for successfully adapting the bodies to succeed in an arena traditionally perceived as the province of men. Female athletes are judged by women, men, and other female athletes alike, apparently emphasizing their femininity over their athletic skills and for having used the cultural capital of their athletic ability to do so. This underlying discourses implies that the argument is that, rather than being grateful for the opportunity of being allowed to participate in the cultural realm of sport, these unappreciated women clearly lack the ability to represent themselves as anything other than *woman* and sexual. As one article put it, "Because female athletes receive 80-90% less coverage of their athletic achievement in the print and electronic media than their male counterparts, female athletes who use this opportunity for non-sport exposure allow the media to continue to marginalize the achievements of the female athlete" (Women's Sports Foundation, 2000).

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What we have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter are the ways in which the media employs particular strategies in the visual representation of sports and athletes. Television in particular provides frameworks of meaning which, in effect, selectively interpret not only the athletic events themselves but also the controversies and problems surrounding the events. In a new media sport such as the WNBA, this is particularly apparent, since discourses and practices of gender and race are palpably on display. Our interest in thinking about these issues as they pertain to sports is not in questioning whether there is a biological difference between male and female athletes. Our interest, rather, lies in how it is that the media interprets this biological difference within a social and cultural set of meanings. As Baker and Boyd (1997), Messner (1998), Cahn (1998), and Heywood and Dworkin (2003) have argued, the task at hand is not to provide evidence that differences exist and to what extent; rather, our goal is to ask why some differences and not others are taken as important and in support of racist and sexist ideologies.

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