

# She Shoots, She Scores: Mediated Constructions of Contemporary Female Athletes in Coverage of the 1999 US Women's Soccer Team

Helene A. Shugart

*Department of Communication, 255 South Central Campus Drive, Room 2400, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112-0491, (801) 561-5686, hs17@utah.edu*

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The contemporary mediascape is populated as never before by scores of female athletes and women's sports teams. Because the mainstream media are notorious for their perpetuation of traditional gender roles, this raises interesting questions regarding how these women are represented in the media. In this essay, I assess the media coverage of the 1999 US women's soccer team; I argue that these athletes are gendered by the media via sexualizing strategies that are subtler and more sophisticated than those of years past. Accordingly, despite apparent progress represented by increasing numbers of female athletes, the hegemonic function of media coverage of them is even more profound today than it has been historically.

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**T**RADITIONAL gender constructs long have been a staple of the mass media, which in turn are a primary, if not *the* primary, means by which those constructs are reified and articulated to the public today. The pervasiveness of rigidly defined gender norms in the media has been well documented in the literature over the last two decades, especially insofar as they are applied to women. In particular, women have been and continue to be, in large part, portrayed as subservient; dependent; other-defined and -oriented; and physically and mentally deficient, explicitly or implicitly in comparison with men (see, e.g., Modleski, 1984; Radway, 1984; Tuchman, 1978). A primary feature of these mediated representations is the objectification and sexualisation

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HELENE A. SHUGART (Ph.D., Ohio State University) is Assistant Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. The author would like to thank Edward Bennett, David Henry, Daniel J. Canary, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and assistance. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the 2000 annual meeting of the National Communication Association.

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of women, particularly to the extent that they are fetishised and displayed, rendered as objects of the male gaze (e.g., Mayne, 1984; Mulvey, 1989; Wolf, 1991). Moreover, many critics note that the relatively recent advent of apparently feminist sensibilities in the contemporary media in fact camouflages subtle strategies that undermine those ideas, predicating them instead on patriarchal terms (e.g., Dow, 1992; Faludi, 1991; Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001).

Perhaps not surprisingly, these sexist representations also permeate media coverage of sports. Bias is evident in the dramatic dearth of coverage of women's sports, both historically and today (e.g., Bryant, 1980; Kane, 1988; Lont, 1995; Rintala & Birrell, 1984). In 1986, Coakley argued that 95 percent of US media coverage of sports was devoted to men's sports; in 1991, Lumpkin and Williams concluded that *Sports Illustrated*, the nation's most widely read sports magazine, devoted roughly 91 percent of its coverage to male athletes; and in 1999, *Business Wire* reported that, although "51 percent of women participate in sports, . . . less than 10 percent of the media [cover] women's sports" (p. 1C). As Kinnick (1998) argues, "the absence of women from sports media is not inconsequential. The implicit message . . . is that female athletes either do not exist, or have no achievements that are newsworthy" (p. 215).

When female athletes are covered, they are often participants in "sex-appropriate" sports, or "those which depict females in aesthetically pleasing motions and poses, emphasizing the erotic physicality rather than the strength of the female body (Daddario, 1992, p. 51). In these sports, such as figure skating and gymnastics, "women literally get points for being pretty and feminine. How well you smile and how spectacular your sequins [are] may be what separates you and makes you a world champion" (Solomon, 2000). Indeed, notes Koivula, media references to female athletes in all sports "more typically employ expressions of aesthetic appeal such as 'graceful' and/or focus on femininity or lack of it . . . [they] are . . . presented according to cultural stereotypes which associate femininity with weakness, dependency, emotion, and submissiveness" (1999, p. 590). This feminizing strategy constitutes what Felshin (1981) calls an "apologetic"—compensation for the violations of gender norms and simultaneous reassurance that these female athletes are, in spite of their athleticism, women.

Similarly, many scholars have noted that media coverage of female athletes tends to focus on their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness (e.g., Daddario, 1992, 1994; Duncan, 1990; Hilliard, 1984; Kinnick, 1998; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). In this way, Duncan argues, female athletes are further trivialized and marginalized by the pressure to embody "cosmetic perfection" (p. 25). Furthermore, scholars cite the inordinate attention devoted by the media to the family life of female athletes, conspicuous in the absence of very little comparable coverage of male athletes (e.g., Daddario; Kinnick; Koivula, 1999), thus defining them in terms of their "other"-orientation and certifying that

“women may be athletes, but they are primarily females” (Koivula, p. 603). Clearly, such foci and coverage not only accommodate but reinforce and even cultivate established gendertypes in the media at large.

Also notable is the fact that media coverage of women’s sports tends to feature individual rather than team sports. Scholars note that this is due to the fact that team sports are generally perceived as masculine, especially insofar as they involve body contact and face-to-face opposition sports (Daddario, 1992; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1998; Koivula, 1999; Rintala & Birrell, 1984). Koivula argues that “in team sports, the athletes directly compete against one another in attempts to outmatch or overpower their opponents. These athletes are more motivated by a need for power. By excluding women from team sports and in the reporting of team sports in the media . . . women are denied the opportunity to exert power in the sporting world” (p. 602). Consistent with this perspective, “sex-appropriate” women’s team sports, until recently, were limited to a “girls’ version” of a “real” (i.e., men’s) sport—for example, softball (as opposed to baseball) and field hockey (as opposed to ice hockey). This served to trivialize those sports as well as women’s athletic contributions to them and, by extension, other sports.

However, within the last six years, the face of women’s sports and, more to the point, media coverage of women’s sports has changed dramatically. This is due in part to the fact that the benefactors of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which requires that schools receiving federal funds provide equal opportunities for women and men, are hitting their athletic stride, thus creating a pool of talented and trained athletes. Perhaps more significant is the fact that, also as a result of Title IX, more than half of all women participate in sports today (“51% of women participate in sports . . .,” 1999), implying a huge potential audience for women’s sports, which in turn has sparked the interest of the most critical factor in the success of sports today: corporate sponsorship. The highly promising market for women’s sports has prompted megacorporations like Nike, Reebok, and Gatorade to invest substantially in the cultivation of women’s sports, which in turn has entailed extensive media coverage precisely in order to capitalize on a large, as-yet-untapped consumer base. Clarke (2000) notes that “opportunities for women to play sports and earn endorsements and make money from the industry have grown exponentially . . . ‘marketers are realizing that there’s an audience’” (p. 1C).

Nearly all of the changes in women’s sports and their coverage by the media have occurred since the 1996 Olympics. The fact that those Olympics were held in the US is significant, given the consequent, relatively more intense US corporate interest and activity in terms of sponsorship. Particularly notable is the advent of media coverage of women’s team sports, in light of their virtual absence prior to that point, no doubt attributable to the aforementioned perception that team sports were, by and large, deemed “sex-inappropriate” for women. In the summer of 1997, the Women’s National Basketball

Association (WNBA) was launched, posing a major challenge to the existing portrayals of women's sports and female athletes in the media.<sup>1</sup> For the first time, female athletes were featured in a team sport in a national and professional capacity, with substantial corporate backing, and it followed in the wake of huge popular (and corporate) interest in and support for men's professional basketball. Although WNBA game rules are slightly modified from those of the NBA, the fact that women were presented on this national and professional scale in a sport identified almost exclusively at that level with men at this point was profoundly significant. In the winter of 1998, the US women's hockey team won the Olympic gold medal. Although, as an amateur outfit, the hockey team could not claim the rank or scope of the WNBA, notable is the fact that women were featured, again, in a sport almost exclusively associated with men. In fact, hockey has a reputation of extreme violence and aggression, perhaps as far removed from the "sex-appropriate" criteria for women as a sport can be. Then, in the summer of 1999, the US women's soccer team won the Women's World Cup tournament. Although neither the women's team nor its success was new, in the months leading up to, during, and following the tournament, it basked in the reflected and growing support for the WNBA and rode a wave of increasing US interest in and support for soccer, in spite of (or perhaps intensified by) the lack of success of the US men's soccer team. Particularly significant in the case of the US women's soccer team is that media coverage of it and its members slightly before, during, and following the 1999 Women's World Cup was excessive, lavish by any standards, even as compared to coverage of men's sports.

The advent of this new genre of female athletes raises some interesting questions, all relevant to how mediated representations of these "new" female athletes mesh with historical representations of women's sports and female athletes. In this essay, I examine as a case study the media coverage of the US National Women's Soccer Team and members thereof during the 1999 Women's World Cup in order to assess how gender is addressed in that coverage. I argue that traditional constructs of gender are reified in that coverage, and the primary if not exclusive means by which that is accomplished is sexualisation of the athletes. I identify and describe the particular strategies employed in the construction of female sexuality in the mediated representations of the US women's soccer team. To this end, I analyse an array of print media, including major newspapers (for example, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Boston Herald*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, and *The Baltimore Sun*); news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, and *Business Week*); entertainment magazines (*People Weekly*, *Redbook*); and the sports magazine *Sports Illustrated*, the premier outlet for coverage of sports in the US. I also include in my analysis

televised coverage of the 1999 Women's World Cup tournament, which aired in its entirety on ESPN and ESPN2 with the exception of the final match, which was broadcast live on the ABC television network. My criteria in selecting these samples for analysis are two: first, a broad and diverse range of media is necessary to confirm my claim that the patterns and strategies I identify occur across different forms of media and are pervasive. Second, a representative sample of specifically mainstream media is necessary to verify my implied claim that the strategies I identify are readily available and accessible to general audiences to the extent that they may shape audience perceptions of, in this case, the female athletes of the 1999 US Women's National Soccer Team.

### The United States, Soccer, and the Women's National Team

Soccer enjoys the prestige of being the most popular sport in the world, but it has not experienced commensurate success in the United States, notable efforts to that end notwithstanding. To some extent, this is due to the fact that this sport, unlike baseball, basketball, and American football, is not indigenous to the US. Most of the support it has received, until fairly recently, has been from immigrants who introduced it into neighborhood pockets until it gathered local, grass-roots support, manifest in youth recreation leagues and, eventually, physical education curricula in schools. The primary reason for soccer's lack of popularity, however, is its inability to accommodate US television formatting. Soccer is played over two 45-minute halves, separated by a 15-minute intermission. However, television fare in the US typically is presented in blocks of only 8–10 minutes, between which advertising is presented for 2–4 minutes. This is not true in other parts of the world, and FIFA—soccer's international governing body—is adamant in its refusal to modify the game rules to satisfy the demands of the US television industry. Because the lack of advertising time translates into millions of lost advertising dollars for that industry, the simple solution of the media has been to ignore soccer. This, in turn, explains the overriding lack of US mainstream interest in and even awareness of the sport until recently.

Historically, the world of soccer has been understood as exclusively masculine because it is a team sport, as noted above; because soccer has a long history in many countries, allowing more time for the establishment of a masculine tradition growing out of a masculine origin; and because many of the countries whose citizens comprise soccer's most ardent supporters are characterized by very traditional cultures, ones that hold to rigid concepts of gender (Seligman, 1999). The US, on the other hand, has no such comparable established, mainstream history of soccer; although the United States Soccer Federation has been in existence since 1913, when Title IX was passed in 1972, few American citizens had any idea what soccer was beyond a

vague image of a black-and-white ball. Thus, despite that fact that the US is by no means free of sexism, when soccer began to grow in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s in especially suburban neighborhoods and then schools, girls began playing the team sport concurrently with boys—possibly the first such occurrence in US if not world history.

By the early 1990s, for the first time in nearly thirty years, the US Men's National Team began to make its presence known on the international scene, participating in a variety of international tournaments. In comparison to the skill levels of other, established national teams, however, it was and still is found wanting, although it has improved significantly over the last decade. The men's team has put in an appearance in the last three World Cup tournaments; although they have had relatively limited success in all of them, their participation has drawn some minor US media attention to the sport. The fact that the US hosted the 1994 World Cup, the most popular sporting event in the world, did much to put soccer on the national map, in large part due to the huge, unanticipated grassroots interest in and support for the tournament in the US. This undeniable interest prompted the media and, inevitably, corporate America to sit up and take notice, and it marked the advent of increasing attention to and coverage of soccer in the media, to the point of the establishment, in the mid-1990s, of US Major League Soccer (MLS), which features professional men's soccer teams in twelve US cities.

Unprecedented, however, and a direct result of Title IX combined with soccer's history (or lack thereof) in this country, I submit, was the formation of a US Women's National Team in 1985, very early in the history of the sport as a truly national presence in the US. Because team members had grown up playing the sport in the officially sanctioned environment of school, they enjoyed and continue to enjoy, so far, an advantage over other national women's teams. That the US team won the first Women's World Cup championship in 1991 was perhaps a foregone conclusion. However, because soccer in general was not the subject of much media coverage and because women's presence in the sport internationally was brand new, this victory caused barely a ripple in the US at the time. The team placed third in the 1995 Cup tournament, but they went on to win the first-ever women's gold medal in soccer at the 1996 Olympics; even then, however, "NBC shoehorned only 10 taped minutes of women's soccer between countless hours of plausibly live gymnastics" (Wahl, 1999a, p. 65). All that changed, however, in 1998; in January of that year, "ABC announced that all 32 World Cup '99 games would be televised nationally on ABC, ESPN or ESPN2" (Wahl, p. 65).

Although it really did not hit its stride until a few weeks prior to the opening of the games, the ensuing media blitz is legendary. The team and its members were the subject of considerable media attention,

although primarily in the entertainment media and not always in the context of their athletic prowess. As the women's team progressed through the tournament, televised collectively in its entirety on ESPN, ESPN2, and ABC, the already heightened media attention increased proportionately, and nothing capped it off more effectively than the team's final win over China, which could not have been any more dramatic: tied at 0-0, the US won in 5-4 penalty kicks. The final match, indeed, "turned out to be the most-watched soccer game in US television history" ("Sports Wire," 1999, p. 23). The resulting media frenzy was phenomenal, possibly more intense than any coverage of a men's championship in any sport and certainly more intense than any coverage, ever, of a women's championship.

Clearly, the case of the 1999 US National Women's Soccer Team is unusual in terms of the scope and depth of media coverage it received. No less interesting is the fact that it garnered that degree of attention prior to the public's awareness of the team members as athletes even though, upon their win, they were lauded as symbolic, exultant figures in the fight for sexual equality, recognized as strong, assertive, successful athletes whose records in the sport of soccer were better than those of the US men's team and even, in some cases, of any soccer team in the world. Evident in the media coverage leading up to the tournament, sexuality was a significant feature of the team's image; in this essay, I explore in depth the construction of female sexuality in the mediated representation of this team and its members during and following the tournament in the context of their athletic performance, as well. Ultimately, I argue that the mediated sexualisation of the team and its members, manifest in ever subtler ways in order to accommodate increased popular consciousness of overtly sexist media practices, overshadows their athleticism and undermines their achievements. As such, as suggested by media coverage of this team, contemporary mediated representations of female athletes function hegemonically in more sophisticated and thus more powerful ways than they have historically.

### Strategies of Sexualisation: The Unmaking of an Athlete

#### *Passive Objectification*

Perhaps the most obvious way in which the women of the US National Team were sexualized in the media was by virtue of their presentation as objects positioned passively for the male gaze, entirely absent of their athletic context. A number of scholars have noted that descriptions and/or lauding of female athletes typically relate to their sexual attractiveness and desirability rather than their athletic prowess (e.g., Bryson, 1987; Daddario, 1994; Hilliard, 1984; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991); others (e.g., Daddario, 1992; Duncan, 1990) have noted that photographic coverage of female athletes is more likely to

feature them, unlike their male counterparts, in nonathletic poses or contexts. Furthermore, female athletes that fit the conventional feminine beauty ideal of “long hair, stylish clothes and lavishly applied makeup” (Duncan, p. 28) are more likely to be featured photographically than those who do not.

Given the history of this particular strategy, its presence in the mediated coverage of the women’s soccer team is not surprising. Much of this occurred prior to coverage of the women in their athletic capacity, including Hamm’s selection as one of *People Weekly’s* 50 Most Beautiful People; Foudy’s appearance in a swimsuit in the pages of *Sports Illustrated*; and Chastain’s nude posing for *Gear* magazine. *The Late Show with David Letterman*, too, contributed to this perception in a variety of ways, for instance by Letterman regularly “showing a picture of the . . . team, in which the players are standing shoulder to shoulder like beauty contestants and appear to be wearing nothing more than ‘Late Show’ T-shirts” (Longman, 1999a, p. D1). The verbal and visual positioning of the women as passive objects for the male gaze persisted in the coverage of the World Cup tournament, as well. Other team members also garnered individual attention in this vein—for instance, *People Weekly* described Chastain as a “blonde and buff . . . California girl” (Tresniowski et al. 1999, p. 54), who, Lipper reported in a *Richmond Times Dispatch* interview with Chastain, “smiled, and seven husky guys working nearby immediately dropped their socket wrenches, screw drivers and calipers and begged her to give them a seminar on corner kicks” (2000, p. C1). However, this was nowhere more evident than in the coverage of Hamm, whose conventional beauty attracted the advertising dollars of, among others, Nike and Gatorade. She was also named the official spokeswoman for the new soccer Barbie, that icon of feminine beauty: “I can kick and throw like Mia Hamm,” proclaims Barbie” (Starr, 1999, p. 61). Televised coverage of the games on both ESPN stations and ABC tended to feature proportionately more close-ups of Hamm—specifically, of her face—than of the other players. Even if this occurred when she was actively playing, her actions were not featured in those shots: only her face was, a practice that ostensibly chronicled her “determination” but that effectively disengaged her representation from its athletic context. Photographs of Hamm that appeared in, for instance, *People Weekly*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Time*, also featured her, more often than not, as passive rather than in action shots, and again, they tended to favour her face.

Written accounts of Hamm also tended to feature her physical appearance in terms of her attractiveness; she was described in both *Time* and *People Weekly* as a “glamour girl” (Saporito, 1999; Tresniowski et al., 1999), and her ponytail was noted in virtually every newspaper and magazine article that referenced her (e.g., Gearan, 1999; Longman, 1999b; Reilly, 1999; Saporito; Starr & Brant, 1999;



Tresniowski et al.). Indeed, the team members collectively have been described on several occasions across the print media surveyed as ponytailed (e.g., Hyman, 1999; Longman, 1999a; Parker, 1999a; Plaschke, 1999; Reilly; Starr & Brant; Tresniowski et al.), as frequently and as reliably as Hamm. Notably, this apparent fixation on or, arguably, fetishisation of ponytails not only served to feminize the athletes by focusing on their appearances but also functioned enthymematically to inform readers that they have long hair. This is consistent with Duncan's (1990) observation that the long hair of female athletes is a key feature in mediated efforts to sexualize them.

Various images and descriptors were invoked in the media coverage of the women's team that furthered this technique of passive objectification. Several writers across the print media made specific reference to the posters of these women (Longman, 1999b; Reilly, 1999; Sullivan, 1999). *People Weekly*, for instance, described Chastain as "America's newest pin-up girl" ("Brandi Chastain," 1999), a descriptor that clearly directed attention to her distinctly visual sexual appeal. Although many of these posters featured the athletes in "action" shots, references to them in the popular media tended to focus on the women's sexual attractiveness, consistently employing the discourse of the "sexy pin-up girl," thus effectively decontextualising the women from the athletic context featured in the posters. For instance, although the athletic Hamm posters did not themselves feature the explicitly sexual connotation associated with the "pin-up girl" descriptor, the references to them in this vein occur with such marked regularity served to render her a visual object and thus, subtextually, sexualize her. Sullivan's comments in *Time* confirms this logic: "What about the fact that as soon as little Suzie puts the autographed poster of Mia Hamm up in her room, little Johnnie suddenly takes to visiting little Suzie's room. And not just little Johnnie, but little Johnnie's dad" (p. 62). Similarly, Reilly (1999) lauded the long-awaited breakthrough of a US women's team as follows in *Sports Illustrated*: "Well, the revolution is here, and it has bright-red toenails . . . just look at the players! They've got ponytails! . . . They've got (gulp) curves" (p. 100)! Concurring with Reilly's implied point that the WNBA did not qualify as a women's team sports breakthrough as well as acknowledging the sexualisation of the women's soccer team, Jennings stated, "The WNBA, with its Janet Reno Look, is crestfallen. The women of soccer garnered sellouts while the WNBA struggles, It was the babes, stupid . . . They were themselves, complete with allure and lip gloss" (qtd. in Solomon, 2000, p. 66).

Of course, objectification and fetishisation of women's bodies are the most familiar ways in which women in general and female athletes in particular have been and continue to be sexualized in the media. This was not evident in its purest, conventional form in coverage of the US women's soccer team, which may imply some small measure of

progress but is, I submit, indicative of a move to less obtuse, more insidious techniques. Reflective of the more strategic manifestation of this old saw is, for instance, the over-the-top (so to speak) coverage of Chastain's removal of her jersey to reveal a sports bra upon scoring the championship. Although I argue later in this essay that the widely covered representation of the act itself is reflective of the sexualisation of female athletic performance, the ensuing media fascination with her motives simply repackaged and barely obscured the long-standing tradition of fetishization of women's breasts in the media by excising the act entirely from its athletic context. Some reporters (e.g., Ackerman, 1999; "Brandi Chastain," 1999) suggested cynically that Chastain's motives in removing her jersey to reveal a Nike sports bra were financial, a "provocative" ploy to secure an endorsement deal with the company. Many others implied that Chastain's action was designed to be sexual, in light of the fact that, after all, Chastain had posed nude, provocatively and unrepentantly, for *Gear* magazine some months earlier, thus making her "the lady in the overpriced underwear" (Hummer, 1999, p. 3B), also known as "the world's most famous underwear model this side of Victoria's Secret" (Lipper, 2000, p. C1). In this vein, much of the coverage subsequent to the event featured the sexual attractiveness of Chastain's body; reports noted her "rock hard abs" (Liddane, 1999, p. Y2) that "you could sharpen garden tools on" (Hummer, p. 3B). Alternatively, coverage also featured the sexual appeal of the black bra she sported that, unlike "the ones with too much spandex that create the 'uniboob' effect . . . [,] launched a thousand whoops" (Radsken, 1999, p. 60), as *The Boston Herald* reported, and consequently, like "Madonna's pointy bra, caused a sensation" (Rubin, 1999, p. C7), according to the *San Francisco Herald*. Neither version attends to the athletic context of the event—scoring the championship goal for the US team.

Analysis of the coverage of the US Women's National Soccer Team reveals that the sexualisation of female athletes by virtue of passive objectification remains a key feature of their mediated representations. However, with some exceptions, the strategy in this case was comparably much less overt in its manifestations. Rather, it was often reflected in apparently innocuous, incidental descriptors or disguised as shrewd commentary. I submit that the notably more subtle technique was a direct result of the fact that, as a team sport with heretofore distinctly masculine connotations, overt objectification of these female athletes would have been blatant and indefensible. In addition, the fact that the team was consistently mentioned in the same breath as and even hailed as "the daughters of Title IX" would throw into sharp relief the obvious, obtuse sexist strategies of the past. The fact that those strategies apparently have become more diffuse is not encouraging, however. On the contrary, that they are now less clearly identifiable affords them untold hegemonic potential, for their repackaging in-

creases the odds that they are “bought” as something else, especially progress.

### *Athleticism as Sexualised Performance*

Closely related to the technique of passive objectification is the sexualisation of female athletic performance. Indeed, the two strategies share a number of characteristics, including fetishisation and the positioning of the female athlete for the male gaze. However, they are distinct in that passive objectification decontextualises the athlete—that is, she is positioned and apprehended independent of her athleticism, absent of signifiers that functionally establish her as an athlete and that feature her engaged in her sport. Conversely, sexualisation of performance turns precisely on depicting the athlete actively engaged in her sport but “reading” it as a sexual text, a performance enacted primarily if not exclusively for the male gaze.

Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) note this technique of sexualized performance, although they do not name it as such, when they compare coverage of an international surfing competition; although commentary was consistently positive for both the male and female athletes, chronicling skills, strength, and experience, visual coverage differed dramatically: whereas the male athletes were depicted fully engaged in the sport, coverage of female athletes in competition featured intense close-ups of their bikini-clad breasts, buttocks, and thighs. In this same vein, for several months in 2000, a running gag on *The Late Show with David Letterman* was the “Anna Kournikova Shot of the Day”: Kournikova, a moderately successful, seeded tennis player who is conventionally beautiful, was featured on the court, engaged in the game. She was almost always featured from the rear, awaiting her opponent’s serve in the classic anticipatory pose—crouched, gripping her racket, legs slightly bent and spread apart, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. This consistent depiction of Kournikova, coupled with Letterman’s purported infatuation with her, functioned to sexualize her by articulating her athletic performance as gratuitous sexual display. In another manifestation of this technique, as noted, some “sex-appropriate” sports for women such as ice skating are identified as such precisely because sexualized performance is an integral feature for which the athletes are rewarded. Solomon (2000) notes that Katarina Witt’s decision to pose for *Playboy* barely registered in the public consciousness

because, as a figure skater, Witt had always played the seductress. (Remember that cut-to-the-navel flamenco dress for her gold-winning ‘Carmen’ routine in the ‘88 Olympics, which brought her a spontaneous marriage proposal from a sports reporter and drools from Alberto Tomba?) Witt was simply transferring a sexpot image from the glinting ice to the glossy pale. (p. 66)

Acknowledging the pressure on female ice skaters to feature their desirability as an integral feature of their performance, Solomon notes

that “the more athletic the competition becomes, the more skaters seem to mitigate their mastery with frilliness” (p. 66).

The sexualisation of the performance of female athletes, then, is not novel; however, again, the US women’s soccer team and what it represented, in addition to the level of media coverage that it received in 1999, *was* novel. Whereas sports such as women’s ice skating are premised, in large part, on the male gaze and the literal exposure of the female body is a necessary feature of water sports (which does not excuse but perhaps explains the ease with which prurience was accepted in and came to characterise the coverage of female athletes in the international surfing competition), the soccer team represented something altogether different. Again, these women were participating in a sport traditionally construed as masculine, and their “performance” attire—oversized, usually grubby shorts and shirts, knee socks and cleats—did not lend itself to sexualisation in the manner of, for instance, bikinis and risqué flamenco outfits. Despite these obstacles, media coverage nonetheless ultimately succeeded in sexualizing the performance of the US Women’s National Soccer Team.

The most blatant way in which sexualized performance characterized coverage of the women’s soccer team was the “controversy” over Chastain’s removal of her shirt upon scoring the winning, championship goal of the Cup tournament, which made her, according to *Sports Illustrated*, “the most talked-about athlete on Earth” (Crothers, 2000, p. 64). Indeed, that image and the ensuing notoriety defined the team, then and now. The removal of jerseys by male athletes in the throes of victory is an extremely common event, perhaps most often apparent in basketball and soccer—so common, in fact, that it is “invisible,” an unremarkable, even expected occurrence (e.g., Hummer, 1999). The action is commonly understood as a function of any or all of the feelings of ecstasy, relief, closure, a symbolic shedding of the restraints of pressure. Notably, the act has never been construed as sexual in media sports coverage when performed by male athletes; in fact, it is often traditional, as when soccer players exchange jerseys with opposing team members at the end of a game.

This stands in almost bizarre contrast to the media frenzy that ensued upon Chastain’s action; although she was wearing a sports bra that “cover[ed] more than a halter top” (Terwilliger, 1999, p. C4) and functions solely to flatten—not accentuate—breasts, the media erupted with sexual connotations. The act was quickly defined as a “striptease” across all print media (e.g., Lipper, 2000, p. C1; Plaschke, 1999, p. D7), in which Chastain variously “stripped,” “peeled,” “ripped,” “whipped” (e.g., Ackerman, 1999; Armstrong, 1999; Hummer, 1999; Hyman, 1999; Saporito, 1999; Terwilliger) off her jersey “to reveal *only* a sports bra” (Hyman, p. 118, italics mine). McEwan (1999) explicitly superimposes a sexual subtext to Chastain’s action when he writes for the *Fresno Bee*, “Brandi Chastain ripped off her jersey, revealing the fit

body that made *Gear* magazine famous" (p. A1), and Saporito, reporting for *Time*, implicitly concurs when he writes, "Hey, her name is Chastain, not Chaste" (p. 58). Hummer writes in the *Atlanta Constitution* that, "immediately after she booted home the winning shootout goal . . . Chastain ripped off her jersey and practically announced to a rapt nation, 'I've got your World Cups right here!'" (1999, p. 3B). Another sports writer quoted in *The Denver Post* censured Chastain for stealing "a page from the Victoria's Secret catalogue" and "cavorting in her underwear." Chastain, he noted, now owns "the most talked-about breasts in the country" (qtd. in Terwilliger, p. C4).

Many reporters (e.g., Kindred, 1999; Plaschke, 1999; Terwilliger, 1999) as well as ABC play-by-play announcer Dellacamera and game analyst Gebauer suggested that Chastain acted out of exuberance, and Chastain herself attributed it to "momentary insanity . . . I thought, My God, this is the greatest moment of my life on a soccer field! I just lost my head" (Saporito, p. 59); more often than not, however, they did so in the context of having framed it as a striptease in the first place, belying their argument. In fact, this is the most typical way in which the women's athletic performance was sexualized in the media—an acknowledgement of their athleticism presented in such a way, implicitly or explicitly, as to guarantee its interpretation as sexual. For instance, as the infamous event unfolded live on ABC, Dellacamera exclaimed, "Look at her, she's taking off her shirt!" Even though he proceeded to describe the scene of celebration that was unfolding on the field, his comment served to draw attention to and underscore the female body; again, among male athletes, this is a virtually standard practice that never warrants comment. Similarly, Plaschke writes in *The Los Angeles Times*,

The most important and empowering women's sports event in history ended Saturday afternoon with, well, the star doing a striptease. But what a marvelous and fitting gesture it was, Brandi Chastain ripping off her white jersey, throwing into the air, then dancing away as America reached out to embrace it . . . Chastain stripped down to her sports bra before running into the arms of her teammates. (p. D7)

In this classic instance of the apparently contemporary technique of sexualizing female athletic performance, even as Plaschke acknowledges the athletic context, dimensions, and implications of Chastain's action, his description of it as a "striptease" functions to sexualize it.

Although the Chastain event was far and away the most blatant and representative instance of the sexualisation of the women's soccer team's performance in mediated coverage, it was not the only instance. General references to the team, too, featured the same dynamic of acknowledging athletic prowess while framing it as sexual schtick. Perhaps chief among these was the popular description of the team as "booters with hooters" across several newspapers and magazines; although the moniker was attributed originally to team co-captain Foudy, the media embraced it unreservedly, all the while virtuously

asserting that they were simply quoting Foudu, as in, for example, *The Baltimore Sun* and *Time* magazine (Eisenberg, 1999; Sullivan, 1999). Irrespective of the origin of the descriptor, its repeated resurrection in the media functioned to sexualize not only the team members but also the athletic efforts themselves, reminding us that even as we watch the game, we must not forget to watch the women playing the game.

The “booters with hooters” reference, in fact, represented a specific manifestation of the sexualisation of performance strategy: the dichotomous juxtaposition of two disparate images, one athletic and one sexual, implicitly or explicitly, that guarantees the conflation of female athleticism with sexual performance. Subtle manifestations of this included, for example, Reilly’s (1999) description of the team in *Sports Illustrated* as “a wonderful combination of Amazonian ambush and after-prom party” (p. 100); although the militant Amazon reference acknowledges the athletic prowess of the team (even if, as a culturally popular image, the Amazon is not entirely without sexual connotation), the specifically “after”-prom reference is designed to elicit popular connotations of nubile, young, potentially sexually available women. Similarly, Tresniowski et al. (1999), chronicling the giddy behaviour of the women mere hours after the World Cup win for *People Weekly*, asked, “Victory-crazed athletes run amok? Actually . . . it was more like a slumber party” (p. 52). Again, the image of the women as athletes is tempered by the vaguely titillating image of grown women at a slumber party, rife with connotations of voyeurism and, arguably, sexual display. Plaschke employs this same technique when he lauds the team’s win in *The Los Angeles Times*: “It was a triumph of a nation that may be finally starting to understand that courage and strength have nothing to do with gender, that heroes can come in all shapes and sizes and shades of lipstick” (p. D7). Again, even as the women’s athletic virtues are celebrated and, accordingly, significance of gender is rejected, it is summarily resurrected with the reference to lipstick, a distinctly feminine artifact rife with sexual symbolism and connotations. It is important to note that the images selected for the juxtaposition in these cases and others in this vein are specifically sexually charged images designed to consequently sexualise the subjects to which they were applied. The fact that the sexual imagery may have been subtly rendered it all the more effective; its apparent innocence is testament to the subtlety and sophistication that can characterize this strategy.

As demonstrated by the media coverage of the 1999 US Women’s National Soccer Team, the strategic sexualisation of female athletic performance has adapted to accommodate the “new” female athlete represented by the women of the team. The overt sexualisation of performance by the media that has characterized coverage of women’s sports historically is rarely apparent in mediated representation of the women’s soccer team. Rather, the strategy appears to be rendered with

greater subtlety, typically couched in ostensible rejection of the sexualisation even as it is invoked; as mere representation of others' or potential perspectives; or innocent imagery. This is likely because, again, given the gendered historical context of soccer and the invisible banner of Title IX under which the team played, overt sexualisation of the athletes' performance would have been incongruous, obvious, and indefensible. However, as with the subtlety of passive objectification in its contemporary incarnation, this is not indicative of progress; rather, the sexualisation of female athletic performance simply has adapted to contemporary sensibilities by becoming more sophisticated, less identifiable, and, consequently, more potent.

### *Vigilant Heterosexuality*

A common strategy by which female athletes have been sexualized in the media historically is the assertion of their connexion to men, implicitly or explicitly, thus negating the implied threat that they collectively pose to traditional, male-defined and -controlled female sexuality. Cahn (1998) argues that the stereotype of the "mannish," lesbian athlete has shaped all aspects of women's sports; she claims that "the lesbian stereotype exert[s] pressure on [female] athletes to demonstrate their femininity and heterosexuality, viewed as one and the same" (p. 76). Clearly, this is most effective if that connexion is overtly sexual, thereby establishing the athletes' heterosexuality and implicitly suggesting that these women remain under male control. As Solomon (2000) puts it, "so out come the boyfriends and body-masking flouncy skirts in a desperate effort to assure a male-dominated culture that just because a woman is strong doesn't mean that her body doesn't still belong to guys" (p. 67).

Many scholars have identified the tendency of the media historically to define female athletes in terms of their relationships (e.g., Bosmajian, 1995; Daddario, 1992, 1994; Foreit et al., 1980; Kinnick, 1998; Koivula, 1999), especially in their roles as wives and mothers. For example, Daddario (1992) notes that the most coverage ever afforded to Chris Evert by *Sports Illustrated* came on the heels of her retirement; it was billed (per the headline) as "I'm going to be a full-time wife" (p. 58). Kinnick, too, in her comparison of media coverage of female and male athletes during the 1996 Olympics, found that female athletes were far more likely to be defined in terms of their marital status or as struggling to balance career and family. These roles serve as explicitly sexual markers, reminding the public that female athletes are not only women but specifically heterosexual women, thus sexualizing them in a particular manner that renders them consistent with rather than threatening to existing concepts of gender.

In her analysis of the gendered dimensions of media coverage of the WNBA, Banet-Weiser (1999) notes that

it is in those sports that most resemble masculinized athletics (for example, softball or hockey) . . . 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 . . . to redefine and recast the sport (or the players) as feminine or womanly (p. 410).

Banet-Weiser found that this occurred most commonly in the WNBA by virtue of the frequent identification of players by the media as wives and mothers; these media strategies, she argues, "provide what seems to be ironclad evidence of the players' heterosexuality" (p. 411). This strategy was very much in evidence in coverage of the 1999 US Women's National Soccer Team, as well, very likely for the same reasons: soccer, again, is considered a masculine sport. Those team members who were married were nearly always described as such across the various print media (e.g., "Brandi Chastain," 1999; Gearan, 1999; Longman, 1999b; Smith, 2000; Starr & Brant, 1999). Hamm and Chastain, the players who garnered the most media coverage, were classic examples of this: Hamm's status as the wife of a Marine pilot and Chastain's marriage to Santa Clara University's women's soccer coach were commonly referenced in even the briefest reports. Many reports, including the *The Washington Post* and *The Atlanta Constitution*, noted that "Hamm's husband, Christian, a Marine pilot, was given leave from duty in Japan to attend the title game" (Goff, 1999, p. D1; Parker, 1999b, p. 8F). Indeed, a four-sentence annotated athletic profile of Chastain in the sports section of *The Atlanta Constitution* included not only that she "revealed her black sports bra" after scoring a penalty kick but that she was "married to Jerry Smith, her college coach at Santa Clara University" (Parker, 1999b, p. 8F). Furthermore, Smith's reaction to Chastain's posing nude in *Gear* magazine and to the notorious sports-bra incident was sought vigorously by the media: "She lives life on the edge and does whatever she does with passion," he was quoted as saying (e.g., "Brandi Chastain," Longman, Tresniowski et al., 1999, p. 55). The fact that his reaction was sought and featured at all cultivated a perception of Chastain as somehow beholden to her husband.

Similarly, Carla Overbeck and Joy Fawcett, the two team members who had children at the time, were nearly always described as mothers in the media, often to the extent that that description eclipsed their athletic identities. Television commentary on both ESPN and ABC during the Cup tournament frequently noted this fact when either woman was featured on the field, and the camera often panned to their children in these cases. Written coverage, as well, in forums as diverse as *The Atlanta Constitution*, *Newsweek*, *Redbook*, and *People Weekly* made consistent reference to the women's status as mothers (e.g., Parker, 1999b; Smith, 2000; Starr & Brant, 1999; Tresniowski et al., 1999). In the *Redbook* article, the only nod to their athleticism is the first sentence, which simply states that the US Women's Soccer Team



won the World Cup; however, the article continues, "what the world didn't see was the incredible balancing act two of these players [Overbeck and Fawcett]—real-life soccer moms—were pulling off" (Smith 2000, p. 62). Similarly, in a very brief athletic profile of the athletes, *The Atlanta Constitution* manages to include the fact that Fawcett is "one of two 'soccer moms' on the team" (Parker, 8F); notably, the profile of player MacMillan in this same article notes that she is "Fawcett's roommate and spends a lot of time with her two young daughters," arguably establishing her maternal nature by proxy. This focus functions to sexualize the athletes; consistent with Banet-Weiser's finding in the case of media coverage of WNBA players, the fact that "many of them are already mothers leav[es] no doubt about their feminine nature" (p. 411). Although the logic is implicit, intense attention to the athletes' role as mothers functions also to establish their heterosexuality.

As noted, however, the mediated construction of female athletes' heterosexuality is not limited to references to their male partners or offspring. Lenskyj (1987) has argued that "sex-appropriate rankings [of sports], based on male-defined femininity, provide the patriarchal culture with power over females and their sexuality" (qtd. in Creedon, 1994, p. 281). I submit that when those sex-appropriate rankings are violated, as in the case of the women's soccer team, a variety of means are utilised to implicitly reify patriarchal control of women and their sexuality. MacKinnon (1987) has argued that "it's threatening to one's takability, one's rapeability, one's femininity to be strong and physically self-possessed. To be able to resist rape, not to communicate rapeability with one's body, to hold one's body for cues and meanings other than that can transform what *being a woman means*" (p. 122, italics hers). I contend that the sexual challenge thus represented by female athletes, especially those who compete in traditionally masculine sports, is often mitigated in media coverage by inordinate focus on male figures in those athletes' lives in such a way that control of female activity is subtextually restored.

Indeed, the consistency with and degree to which female athletes are defined in terms of male figures do much to suggest patriarchal direction and control of those athletes in such a way that other strategies of sexualisation are complemented and reinforced. This is evident currently, for instance, in coverage of sibling tennis players Venus and Serena Williams; their father (also their coach) is referenced in that coverage, without fail, as a very controlling, even tyrannical figure, entirely responsible for his daughters' careers (e.g., Peyser & Samuels, 1998; Price, 1999; Rosenblatt, 1999). This depiction functions not only to infantilise the women and trivialize their athletic accomplishments but to represent them as susceptible and submissive to the whims of a controlling male figure. Although sexualized implications of this image on its own terms are largely inferential, at the very least, such a

representation is commensurate with and strengthens other strategies of sexualisation of these and other female athletes that depend upon their articulation as passive and pliant.

In the case of the women's soccer team, several of the women are described across the print media as daughters with explicit reference to their fathers, although references to their mothers are far less frequent (e.g., Gearan, 1999; Tresniowski et al., 1999; Wahl, 1999b). However, the person most associated with familial male figures was Mia Hamm. A *New York Times* article biographically defines Hamm in terms of male figures in her life; she is described as "now married to a Marine pilot, Hamm is the daughter of an Air Force colonel" (Longman, 1999b, p. 33). Another article confirms that her father is the colonel; her mother was a ballerina (Gearan, 1999), an occupation whose feminine ethos is so far removed from soccer that it may reinforce the idea that male rather than female influence was a key factor in Hamm's success, especially in light of the very masculine connotations of the military occupations of her husband and father. More frequent and explicit were references to Hamm's brother, Garrett, who died in 1997 of a rare blood disorder, in print media ranging from *Time* to *The New York Times* (e.g., Gearan 1999; Longman 1999b; Saporito 1999) as well as in ESPN, ESPN2, and ABC television coverage of the tournament. He is described in *The Sunday Telegram* as her "role model," whom she "followed . . . to touch football games and soccer games . . . he will always inspire her" (Gearan, D1). The repeated establishment in the media of the link between Hamm's athletic success and her relationship with her brother suggests that she owes that success, in large measure, to him; even deceased, we are told, he continues to be the driving force behind her, as evidenced by the well-publicized fact that she wears his initials on her cleats. These references to male figures undoubtedly reflect an effort to play up "human interest" angles in coverage of these athletes. However, the consistency with and degree to which it occurs across the media, especially in the context of the absence of female figures in the athletes' lives, suggests that they do more than just that. That is, the particular form that this human interest angle assumes establishes a pattern of framing the athletes as personally shaped and motivated as well as, in the case of Hamm's brother and Chastain's soccer-coach husband, professionally molded by male figures in their lives. Again, I submit that consistently attributing the athletes' skill, drive, and success to important men in their lives functions to assert male influence, if not control, over female athletic performance. Furthermore, by depicting the athletes as both passively susceptible and receptive to that influence, this practice complements and may reinforce other strategies of sexualisation that similarly hinge upon a representation of the women as available and accessible to men.

Another way in which male control is implied via the media in the case of the women's soccer team is by virtue of the patriarchal casting of the athletes' relationship with their male coach, Tony DiCicco (e.g., Shipley, 1999; Starr & Brant, 1999; Wahl, 1999a, b). The fact that he doesn't treat the players "like men" was frequently cited in media such as *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *People Weekly*, as was the fact that this apparently was a directive issued by the women themselves; Hamm was often quoted as having told DiCicco to "coach us like men but treat us like women" (e.g., Shipley, 1999; Starr & Brant; Tresniowski et al., 1999). Venturini, another team member, notes in *The Washington Post* that "he's almost like a father figure," and midfielder Lilly commends DiCicco for recognizing that "there is a difference coaching men and women, and that's key" (Shipley, p. D1), establishing DiCicco's highly traditional patriarchal role in not only the athletes' professional lives but their personal lives, as well.

DiCicco was chronicled frequently in the media as the critical component in the team's success; for instance, his decision to move Foudy from defensive to attacking midfield was credited in *Sports Illustrated* as the "change [that] transformed her into a goal scorer" (Wahl, 1999b, p. 67). Indeed, even the 1999 World Cup victory was attributed to him—at the last minute, DiCicco instructed Chastain to take the last penalty kick in place of the scheduled Foudy; the fact that he had Chastain working on scoring with her left foot, as she did in that penalty kick, for several months was celebrated as remarkable precience (Wahl, 1999a). His numerous strategies—including the use of a psychologist—to engineer trust and cohesiveness among team members were highly lauded in the newspaper and magazine coverage (e.g., Shipley; Starr & Brant) as well as in ESPN and ABC television coverage of the tournament, brandished as evidence of his coaching prowess. DiCicco's talent may very well have been responsible for many if not most of the team's successful plays, and certainly, crediting the coach with a team's success is a common practice in coverage of men's teams, as well—there is nothing inherently gendered about these depictions of DiCicco in and of themselves. However, such discussions of DiCicco nearly always occurred in the context of the patriarchal construct noted above: that he treats his players like women and is something of a father figure to them. Accordingly, crediting DiCicco with the team's success takes on an additional layer of meaning, gendering the practice and contributing to a perception of his direction of the women as specifically patriarchal. As part and parcel of the packaging of the athletes as defined and perhaps even controlled by male figures, media coverage of DiCicco and his relationship with the athletes may contribute to their sexualisation, as well, at least insofar as complementing other sexualizing strategies, by establishing the athletes' specifically feminine reliance on and responsiveness to his influence. The fact that one man is portrayed as controlling many

women probably augments this dynamic; the repeated assertion in mediated coverage of the team that the athletes are women and he treats them as such certainly appears to do so.

If an ironic entertainment ploy rather than legitimately professional, perhaps the most compelling evidence of the argument that male control of the team as represented in media coverage is linked to sexualisation of the athletes is the David Letterman phenomenon. Again, much of the publicity afforded the team in the weeks prior to the Cup tournament came about by virtue of Letterman's avid, ongoing interest in the team; he referenced the women on his show nearly every night. As noted, that interest was characterized by nothing so much as overt sexualisation of the athletes. Dubbing the team "babe city" and its members "soccer mamas," Letterman, arguably the single most influential broker of pop culture today, "proclaimed himself the team owner and spiritual guru . . . [giving] the American women attention they could never have expected," reported *The New York Times* (Longman 1999a, p. D1).

Notably, Letterman's shtick garnered nearly as much media coverage as the team itself did for its athletic accomplishments, as evidenced across the print media, from major newspapers to newsmagazines to entertainment and sports magazines (e.g., "Brandi Chastain," 1999; Clarke, 2000; Longman, 1999a; Saporito, 1999; Seligman, 1999; Solomon, 2000; Sullivan, 1999; Terwilliger, 1999). Apparently, most team members solicited, participated in and, in so doing, encouraged Letterman's antics; indeed, they sent him Chastain's *Gear* picture, which resulted in an invitation to Chastain to appear on the show as well as the team posing in nothing but "Late Night" T-shirts. More significant, however, is the fact that Letterman's lecherousness, attendant to and justified by his self-designated "ownership," received the extent of coverage that it did, even if it was only assumed for comic effect. This coverage, more than Letterman's antics in and of themselves, demonstrates the degree to which mediated representations of the athletes functioned to sexualize them. In this vein, Solomon notes that Letterman's "gush" was not innocent fun, "not merely a compliment paid to the healthy good looks of the World Cup victors. It was a desperate bleat for control, a reassertion of the male prerogative to judge women on their appearance and to insist that appearance matters most of all, a recuperation of women's bodies as, first and foremost, objects for men's pleasure, and admission that the team's skill and self-sovereignty scared him" (p. 66). This may or may not explain Letterman's true motives; however, and more to the point, I argue that reassertion of male prerogative and the recuperation of women's bodies for men's pleasure *are* the consequences of the extensive media coverage of Letterman's construction of the team and his relationship to it. That coverage ultimately functioned to legitimize the sexualisation of the athletes and, importantly, attach it to male control; the scenario

created by Letterman is interchangeable with the image of the harem, and coverage of it serves to reify that image and its attendant, sexual implications.

The codes by which the team members were sexualized by virtue of establishment of their heterosexuality—or, at minimum, their projection as heterosexual—were subtle. Indeed, the most obvious of these tactics was the description of the athletes of wives and/or mothers, subtle in that it was typically framed as a passing, incidental reference. More insidious was the repeated construction of the athletes as dependent upon and subject to the control of men. Consistent media definition of their private and professional personas in terms of dominant male figures in their lives ultimately represented the women as passive and even dependent upon that definition and implied direction. This depiction certainly reifies traditional gender roles, but given the specifically sexual implications and overtones of male control of women as well as the myriad other strategies of sexualisation in which this particular representation occurs, I argue that it establishes at the very least their receptivity to male control, thus functioning as the premise for the athletes' sexualisation.

### *Asexuality as Foil*

Given the general strategies of sexualisation that characterized media coverage of the US Women's National Soccer Team, the markedly divergent representations of two of its members—goalkeeper Briana Scurry and midfielder Michelle Akers—were highly conspicuous. Neither of these athletes was featured as passively sexual, nor was their performance sexualized in mediated coverage. Similarly, neither woman was described individually in terms of her personal connexion to or dependence on men for her skill, drive, or success, such that the discourse of heterosexuality did not pervade mediated characterizations of them. The notable exceptions that these two athletes represent, then, could suggest that media coverage of female athletes is more diverse and less geared toward sexualisation than I have argued. However, I submit that these two exceptions, in fact, prove the rule, given the extreme nature and degree of the disparity between the markedly nonsexualised representations of these women and the highly sexualised representations of all of the other teammates. As such, I argue that, by virtue of this sharp dichotomy as opposed to mere difference in representation, mediated representations of these athletes nonetheless subtextually turn on sexuality. In their cases, it is asexuality that becomes the primary feature of their representations, which in turn functions as a foil against which the sexualized characterizations of the other athletes are more clearly defined.

Scurry's save during the World Cup final match ultimately decided the game; during penalty kicks, neither China nor the US (including Chastain's final goal) shot wide of the goal, but Scurry managed one

block, thus making the win possible. However, in general, she did not receive the credit nor remotely the publicity that Chastain did; curiously, even when she was credited as saving the game, she was mentioned only in passing in print coverage of that final, across newspapers, entertainment magazines, and even *Sports Illustrated* (e.g., Plaschke, 1999; Saporito, 1999; Tresniowski et al., 1999). This conspicuous lack of coverage was almost certainly a function of the fact that Scurry was the only African-American regular team member; Seligman (1999) argues that the team's popularity is attributable primarily to the fact that, Scurry aside, "they were white. Very white . . . David Letterman wasn't slobbering over his 'babes' just because they were cuties—they were the same type of cuties he remembered from back in Indiana" (p. 205). Addressing historical mediated representations of African-American female athletes, Solomon (2000), too, notes that "they are characterized according to a long, racist tradition that figures the black woman's body as nonfeminine and laboring . . . [O]ur culture's abiding racialized definitions of femininity make it that much harder to tame African American athletes as sex kittens and girls-next-door (as if certain neighborhoods don't have girls-next-door)" (p. 67).

Similarly, Hirshey observes that, "the question needs to be asked, would this team be receiving all the attention if they looked like the Brazilian women's national team—boyish, wholly unglamorous and black?" (qtd. in Longman 1999, p. D1). As such, Scurry's remarkable "anonymity," as *Time* described it, (Starr & Brant, 1999, p. 48), dramatic in the face of the media hype revolving about other team members, can be explained by an established, racist tradition in the coverage of African-American female athletes that does not lend itself to sexualisation of them, as both Seligman and Solomon have argued with respect to coverage of the WNBA.

Notably, on the rare occasions when Scurry was mentioned briefly, her race was nearly always identified across the print media (e.g., Saporito, 1999; Seligman, 1999; Tresniowski et al., 1999), usually as "the only African-American regular on the team" (Parker, 1999b, p. 8F). Indeed, one of the more in-depth treatments she received, in *People Weekly*, emphasized this feature by defining her as racially motivated: "I was usually the only African American on any team I played on," says Scurry, who believes her World Cup performance . . . could help her in introducing soccer to the inner cities. 'It's not so much a weight that I carry; it's more like a banner'" (Tresniowski et al., p. 58). Politicizing her in this way distanced her even further from her teammates, nearly all of whom were featured in the media as the very "sex kittens and girls-next-door" that Solomon (2000) describes. Indeed, her characterization as committed to progressive, "politically correct" social change was at a far remove from the actions of her decidedly "non-PC" teammates who had no qualms about using sexu-

ality to market the team, for example by posing nude or by piquing Letterman's interest in sending him the nude photo, and defending their actions. For instance, *The New York Times* quoted Fawcett as stating that, in posing nude, Chastain "just wanted to get the point across that she feels good about herself." In the same article, Foudy defended her posing in a swimsuit for *Sports Illustrated* by stating, "you're never going to escape sexual references with women" (qtd. in Longman, 1999a, p. D1). Scurry's disapproval of these actions was recorded in that same *New York Times* article, as well, contrasting sharply with those sentiments: "we don't just strut around in little skirts" (Longman, p. D1). She elaborated on her stance in a *Time* article, stating "I don't think you have to run around naked to sell the game" (Sullivan, 63), again in contrast to the reported nonchalance of her teammates. This characterization of Scurry does not simply distinguish her from her teammates; it positions her as diametrically oppositional to her teammates on the point of sexuality. This functioned to discursively link her political consciousness with asexuality and generally characterize her as asexual relative to her teammates. Scurry's mediated identity as either invisible (by virtue of its lack) or racially defined may appear to have been a provisional improvement over the relatively rampant sexualisation of her teammates. However, for the reasons noted above, I argue that it effectively constructed her as a foil, a background against which the highly visible, *white* sexuality of the other athletes was thrown into sharp relief. Rather than countering the sexualisation of the athletes on the team, Scurry's notable exclusion dramatized it and endowed it with particularly racialised meanings.

This same dynamic was evident in coverage of Michelle Akers, although age and not race was the defining feature in her case. Contrary to Scurry's invisibility in the media, Akers received considerable attention, likely due to the fact that she was a formidable presence on the field, a playmaker whose contributions simply could not be ignored. Notably, Akers was the most masculine, as traditionally defined, of the players; she was notoriously aggressive, described across the print media as "gutsy," "brave," "a lioness," "dominant," "relentless," "reckless," "driven by vengeance," and possessed of "unsurpassed strength" (e.g., Saporito, 1999; Starr & Brant, 1999; Kindred, 1999; Tresniowski et al., 1999; Wahl, 1999b). Akers acknowledged her take-no-prisoners athletic persona in *Sports Illustrated*: "It's not like I go out there and think I'm the Terminator . . . I play hard, and people just bounce off me, or I go through them. I don't notice it until after I get hit in the face" (Wahl, p. 39). Moreover, Akers did not conform to conventions of feminine beauty as most of her teammates did; for one thing, she was physically larger and more muscular than the other women. As such, her aggressive athletic performance did not lend itself to sexualisation in the way that, for instance, Chastain's or Hamm's did. By virtue of

contrast, then, Akers potentially posed a significant threat to the otherwise highly feminised and sexualized images of the team.

That potential was effectively countered, however, by her intense defeminisation and desexualisation in the media. Again, as with coverage of Scurry, this may initially appear to be a refreshing, progressive departure from the overwhelmingly sexualized characterizations of the other teammates. However, in Akers' case as well, the extreme nature of the juxtaposition was glaring, as suggested by the fact that coverage of her explicitly, consistently, and sharply contrasted her with her teammates. Without fail, even as her undeniable athletic prowess was chronicled, she was presented as war torn and decrepit, in marked contrast to her "buff," "healthy, full-bodied," and "curv[aceous]" teammates as described in, respectively, *People Weekly* (Tresniowki et al., 1999), *Sports Illustrated* (Reilly, 1999), and *Time* (Sullivan, 1999), for instance. She was the oldest starting member of the team, a fact that was noted in every instance of her coverage. Certainly, her age was the primary descriptor applied to her in the television commentary of the games, across ESPN, ESPN2, and ABC, and every print article that referenced her noted her status as the eldest, as well (e.g., Kindred, 1999; Saporito, 1999; Starr & Brant, 1999; Terwilliger, 1999; Tresniowki et al.; Wahl, 1999b). In 1999, Akers was 33 years old—one year older than several other members of the team, including Overbeck and Foudy, two years older than Chastain, and considerably younger than many professional male athletes. Even more pronounced, albeit (significantly) presented in tandem with her age, was the representation of Akers as battle scarred, an image that did much to desexualise her. She was consistently described as "suffering from" or "battling" chronic fatigue syndrome—as opposed to, for instance, dealing with it or diagnosed with it. Saporito described her in *Time* as "a 33-year-old orthopedic disaster, . . . dogged by chronic fatigue syndrome and damaged knees" (59–60); Starr & Brant noted in *Newsweek* that Akers injured her shoulder some years earlier when a fan "grabbed her hand in a high five and wouldn't let go" (p. 47); and Kindred, writing for *Sporting News*, described Akers as "spending all but her life's breath" (63) in the final match. For *Sports Illustrated*, Wahl chronicled in almost lurid detail Akers' injury in the last minutes of the game and the moments thereafter, coming dangerously close to describing a doddering old woman: she had run into Scurry on the field and "slumped woozily to the turf," at which point she was removed to the US locker room, where she was placed on a gurney and administered oxygen. When Chastain scored the winning goal, however, "Akers ripped out her IV lines, tossed aside the oxygen mask and walked haltingly . . . to the field for the award ceremony." Later, after "absorbing four liters of fluid intravenously, twice the postgame dosage she normally receives to combat chronic fatigue syndrome,"



she shuffled onto the veranda... for the team's celebration party. She looked typically drained. Her face was wan and discolored with pale blotches, and she wore a butterfly bandage on the crook of each arm where the IV's had left their marks . . . . As if on cue, Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" came over the loudspeakers. (pp. 39-43).

Notably, this consistent mediated representation of Akers as old and physically ravaged cast her not merely as distinct from her teammates but diametrically opposed to their youth and "sexy" physical wholeness. Indeed, this dynamic was crystallised, as in Scurry's case, in media coverage that cited Akers' disapproval of the other team members' actions in using sexuality to market the team: Akers noted in *Time*, "I am a bit uncomfortable with Brandi's deal," (*Sullivan, 1999*, p. 63), elaborating later in *The New York Times* that "it has a reflection on us as a team and women's sports as a whole. You don't want something like that to detract from the excellence of this team and the message that we're striving to put out" (*Longman, 1999a*, p. D1). Significantly, as in Scurry's case, both of these articles also included comments of the other team members that endorsed those actions. As such, Akers' mediated characterization served at least two purposes: In the first place, it effectively desexualized her. Absent the age and injury references, Akers was an aggressive, powerful female athlete whose persona and physical appearance did not lend themselves to easy feminisation or sexualisation; rather, as a "masculine" woman, she more closely resembled the stereotype of the lesbian athlete that Cahn (1998) describes.<sup>2</sup> At the very least, irrespective of imagined sexual orientation, her aggressiveness suggested that she would not be receptive to male control and its sexual connotations. However, by simultaneously casting Akers as decrepit, that potentially threatening, unfettered sexuality was negated; female sexuality, especially in the US, is almost exclusively associated in the media with nubile young women. Although Akers was, in fact, quite young and only slightly older than her sexualized teammates, focusing on her injuries and illness cultivated an image of her as much older than she was and thus sexually nonviable, effectively neutralizing any challenge that she might have posed to established media practices pertaining to the sexualisation of female athletes.

The representation of Akers as elderly and decrepit also functioned in the same way that Scurry's representation as invisible or, when visible, raced does: as a foil. Like Scurry, precisely due to the extreme and opposite characterization of Akers as relative to her teammates, Akers' identity as a sexual nonentity served as a backdrop against which the sexuality of the other team members was played out; her sexual nonviability as the female elder stood in sharp contrast to their sexually defined representations. Arguably, the representation of Akers as decrepit and physically ravaged also served as a warning of sorts to deter female athleticism, along the lines of the antiquated argument that extreme physical exertion is damaging to women; I would go

further to say that, as a warning, it also advised women that one cannot be both aggressively athletic and sexually viable.

As with the preceding strategies, this strategy of sexualisation by negation—dramatising the sexualisation of female athletes by virtue of their explicit and dramatic contrast with sexually nonviable colleagues—was characterized by subtlety and camouflage. Akers' age and physical infirmities were chronicled ostensibly to laud or "lionize" (Wahl 1999b: 39) her athletic prowess; in fact, they did elicit a degree of awe and admiration, but they also, most assuredly, created an image of her as damaged and pathetic, worlds and years removed from her vibrant, healthy, nubile, "young" teammates. Moreover, in the same way, this representation serves to desexualise Akers and, in so doing, heighten the sexualized images of her teammates. Similarly, Scurry's relative invisibility and, when she was acknowledged, conspicuous identification as African American—in the context of historical desexualisation of black female athletes—lent a particularly racialised dynamic to the sexualisation of her teammates. It is worth noting that the media did not strive for as much subtlety or disguise in covering (or not covering, more accurately) Scurry, confirming Seligman's (1999) and Solomon's (2000) point that the invisibility of black female athletes is standard practice and does not warrant explanation or excuse.

### CONCLUSION

The sexualisation of female athletes by the media is merely one of many ways in which women's sports have been devalued and marginalized historically. As noted, many scholars have attested to the fact that mediated coverage of women's sports is fundamentally hegemonic, a function accomplished in myriad ways—for instance, relative dearth of recognition, focus on appearance, reification of the traditional, familiar roles of female athletes, characterizations of weakness, and linguistic sexism. My interest in this essay was to examine contemporary coverage of female athletes in a women's team sport in order to discern any changes in representation, given that team sports historically have been identified as sex-inappropriate for women.

Analysis of media coverage of the US Women's National Soccer Team reveals that mainstream media coverage of women's sports continues to be hegemonic, although the ways in which that function is realized appear to assume distinctive patterns. For instance, dearth of recognition was certainly not an issue in the case of the women's soccer team; quite possibly, it garnered more coverage than any men's sporting event ever has in the United States. In addition, with some exceptions, linguistic sexism and characterizations of weakness did not appear to characterize coverage as consistently as it has in the past, a trend that Kinnick (1998) has already noted in her comparison of coverage of female and male athletes during the 1996 Olympics. On the contrary, in the case of the women's soccer team, the hegemonic nature

of media coverage relied almost exclusively on the sexualisation of the athletes, a pattern borne out across a broad and diverse range of mainstream media.

The strategies by which said sexualisation was accomplished in this case—passive objectification; sexualisation of performance; vigilant heterosexuality; and asexuality as foil—are not all new; however, even those that have an established track record appear to be more sophisticated, less visible, camouflaged as earnest, legitimate coverage or derisively attributed to someone else's poor taste. Further research is warranted to determine whether the strategies identified in this case study are characteristic of the media coverage of other contemporary female athletes, as well. In the case of the women's soccer team, that media coverage turned on sexualisation may be attributable to the fact that blatant sexism, especially of the patronizing or condescending variety, on the part of the media would be more recognizable and slightly less tolerated today in general. Relatedly, women's sports today are explicitly linked to Title IX, a fact that undoubtedly elicits a measure of consciousness regarding sexist media practices regarding coverage of female athletes. Sexualisation, however articulated, on the other hand, can be attributed, legitimately or not, to the athletes themselves. The sexualisation of the athletes thus often appears to be accomplished under the guise of lauding their achievement; indeed, the images are presented as inseparable. Banet-Weiser (1999) has argued the major sponsors of the WNBA "have adopted explicit liberal feminist rhetoric in their advertisements, . . . [which] shapes the dominant construction of women athletes" (p. 419). In this vein, Cole (2000) cautions against "the corporate perspective' that typically confuses sporting achievements with political progress" (p. 7). Analysis of the 1999 women's soccer team leads me to conclude that the same rhetoric is employed by the media in the sexualisation of female athletes today. Consequently, the hegemonic potential of that coverage is profound; packaged as progress, equality, and power, the mediated contemporary female athlete instead delivers highly traditional female sexuality. Strong, we are told, is sexy; this sounds like progress, but in fact, it is an appropriation in which female strength has been redefined as male pleasure.

"Packaging," in fact, is the appropriate metaphor; that athletes are packaged and commodified is not news, as Banet-Weiser (1999) suggests and, indeed, any casual survey of contemporary advertising can attest. Although we are most familiar with this as an advertising ploy, the news media play a powerful role in the creation of an athlete-as-product. At the very least, by virtue of degree and kind of exposure, they cultivate an image, if they do not create it. The case of the US Women's National Soccer Team, in fact, affords a glimpse into the creation of a product. A number of writers (e.g., "51% of Women . . ." 1999; Clarke, 2000; Kilborn, 1998) have noted that wom-

en's sports are poised to reap untold corporate profits given the coming-of-age of Title IXers. Historically, the selling of women in the media has been predicated on their sexualisation, and given the fact that the established sports audience remains primarily male, the sexualisation of the female athlete is perhaps inevitable. Nelson chides "the appropriation of women's sports as sexy, as seductive . . . . The richer and more powerful women athletes as a group become, the more often they are made to resemble prostitutes" (qtd. in Kilborn, 1998, p. D10). Kindred (1999) concedes this point when he writes, "Yes, sex sells, and, yes, men will always watch women's games in the way men have always watched women" (p. 63).

The unprecedented media coverage of the US Women's National Soccer Team primed the American audience for the female athlete-as-product as never before (e.g., Ackerman, 1999; Clark, 2000; Cole, 2000). The sexualisation of the team members by the media, in essence, facilitated their commodification. Thus positioned, they had already been constructed as appropriately feminine and nonthreatening—as Solomon (2000) puts it, "What a relief, . . . the world [said]: Off the field, the soccer team reads as thoroughly hetero! And giddily sidles up to the image" (p. 67). This, coupled with the massive exposure they had received, made them a corporate sponsor's dream, for the news media had accomplished the necessary marketing. Confirming this symbiosis, in one post-Cup Nike ad, Chastain is shown playing foosball with NBA player Kevin Garnett and others: "She scores a goal, then notices Garnett staring intently at her—apparently hoping for another World Cup stripping" (Clarke, p. 1C).

As revealed in the media coverage of the US Women's National Soccer Team, it, too, fell victim to what Kane calls "the Babe Factor"—the sexualisation of the female athlete (qtd. in Hyman, 1999, p. 118). The strategies by which it was accomplished by the media in this case are, however, distinctive in many ways, especially in terms of their subtlety and sophistication and, not least of all, their appropriation of feminist sensibilities. As such, the hegemonic potential of these strategies is profound, a potential compounded by the ultimate consequence of that coverage: commodification of the sexualized female athlete.

#### NOTES

1. Although the WNBA historically precedes the US National Women's Soccer Team in terms of media coverage, its teams and players have not received remotely comparable levels of coverage. Seligman (1999) and Solomon (2000), citing racist media attitudes, argue that this is directly attributable to the fact that the WNBA is largely composed of black women: accordingly, Seligman argues, "The U.S. 11 [team members] won the 'hearts of America' because . . . goalkeeper Briana Scurry aside, they were white. Very white. This wasn't America's team; it was middle America's team" (205).

2. Interestingly, Wahl (1999b), in an apparent nonsequitur, makes a point of noting that Akers is "a devout Christian" (39). Arguably, such a description contributes to an image of Akers as traditional and, thus, sexually nonthreatening if not nonviable.

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