

SO WHAT IF THE SPORTS MEDIA TRIVIALIZES WOMEN?
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF THE
SPORTS MEDIA ON YOUNG FEMALE ATHLETES AND THEIR SELF-
PERCEPTIONS

BY

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DEDICATION

to all those who just play

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A long time ago, or so it seems, I decided that I would try my hand at writing a thesis. After all, I wanted to leave the option of pursuing a doctorate open. Boy, was I naive. Or perhaps unrealistic? Anyway, I had no idea exactly how much work a thesis entailed, much less a qualitative thesis. Some have said that the joy is in the journey, and not the destination. Well, I for one, am quite happy to be done with the journey. But how *was* the journey you ask? Although not always a visit to "Camp Happyland", it was admittedly worthwhile. The process, and it *is* a process, was long, yet satisfying.

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ABSTRACT

SO WHAT IF THE SPORTS MEDIA TRIVIALIZES WOMEN? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF THE SPORTS MEDIA ON YOUNG FEMALE ATHLETES AND THEIR SELF-PERCEPTIONS

by

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Content analyses of sports media have thoroughly documented the trivialization of female athletes. Duncan and Brummett (1993) identified two common assumptions drawn from these studies. The first assumption is that the sexist content of the sports media must disempower female athletes. The second assumption is that the text of the media is univocal, that there are no other possible interpretations of the intended message. This qualitative study sought to examine the validity of these two assumptions by specifically looking at how the sports media affects young female athletes' self-perceptions.

The participants in this study were players in an under-15 Olympic Development Program girls' soccer team. In-depth, open ended interviews were conducted with each individual. A schedule of questions was formulated after reviewing the previous research in the areas of sports media and self-perceptions.

Findings indicated that this particular group of young athletes did not feel the sports media negatively impacted

their perceptions of their ability, the importance of their participation, the importance of their sport, or their perceptions of females in sport. Instead, they demonstrated an ability to use their "perceived expertise" to intensively critique, or filter, the sports media's presentations of women in sport and particularly soccer. They believed they could discriminate between accurate portrayals and those that were simply untrue. These girls, however, also recognized that society does not have the same level of expertise to filter through misinformation. This inability of society to filter greatly concerned many of these girls.

In short, these findings did not support the general assumptions identified by Duncan and Brummett (1993). The sports media did not negatively impact these girls' self-perceptions. Further, these girls were able to find multiple interpretations and uses of the sports media.

These findings, however, do parallel the previous sport and self-perception theories established by Harter (1978) and Bandura (1986). The use of perceived expertise as a filter does not contradict the theoretical belief that personal experience supersedes vicarious experience when determining self-perceptions. This study would suggest that a positive participation experience is far more influential on self-perceptions than a positive television portrayal.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Sport as a Male Domain

"Sheryl Swoopes is the equal of Michael Jordan."
Doesn't sound quite right, does it? How about, "Sheryl Swoopes is the Michael Jordan of women's basketball?" Now that's closer. Why? Because a woman will never be the equal of a man in sports. Sports are for men, not for women.

This has been the customary perception of athletics. Sport is a male domain. By valuing traits that are commonly viewed as "masculine", such as competitiveness, independence, and aggressiveness, sport has historically been a proving ground for males (Birke & Vines, 1987; Coakley 1990). There is also a cultural understanding that most females are biologically inferior, and therefore cannot meet the physical demands of athletics as well as their male counterparts (Birke & Vines 1987; Ireland 1993). These two ideas quickly lead to the popular assumption and opinion that the sporting arena is a less appropriate place for females. Modern athletic competitions have developed from exhibitions of athletic skill into male representations of heroism, and opportunities for "proving oneself" (Birke & Vines, 1987).

Watson (1993) suggests that sports inherently discriminate against women because the accepted definition of excellence in sport is dependent upon the male model of athletics. Watson (1993) identifies that our culture defines excellence in sport in terms of physical superiority. The

faster, stronger, more coordinated athlete is the better athlete. Because of the physical differences between most men and women, women will almost always be inferior by default. Sport is therefore an arena that will continue to perpetuate the male hegemony.

Watson (1993), however, also recognizes that there may be many men, due to inadequate strength, size, or speed, who will also never be able to achieve excellence. He continues by pointing out that there are some sports that are not "masculine", in which women may actually have the advantage. These include the balance beam and long distance endurance events. However, sports that value the physical attributes possessed by females, are far fewer than those that value the physical traits possessed by males (Watson, 1993). Because of this, men are viewed as being far more capable of excellence in sport than women.

Watson (1993) also points out that that there may be other factors that place women at a disadvantage in sports such as historical patterns, economic benefits, and social expectations. These factors may influence females' "...interest in and support of sport...[but] it is the disadvantage women face in terms of the physical demands of pursuing excellence in specific sports..." (Watson, 1993, p. 517) that places women in an inherently inferior position to men in the realm of athletics.

"The pursuit of excellence in sport...is not gender neutral, and its gender consequences fall as burdens upon women," (Watson, 1993, p. 518). With society subscribing to

the model that higher, faster, and stronger is better, women pursue an inherently different form of excellence. Sport remains the proving ground for males.

Women in Sport

Many women and girls, however, do participate in sports despite the popular view of athletics as an "old boy's club" (Gantz & Wenner, 1988; Wenner, 1989). The implementation of Title IX, in the 1970's brought with it a continuing increase in female competitors (Coakley, 1990; Ewing and Sufeldt, 1996; Messner, 1988). Messner (1988) speculates "that we are now moving into an era in which female athletes have worked hard enough to attain a certain level of legitimacy..." (p. 205). Messner also recognizes that this development is not being met without societal opposition. Once girls and women decide to participate they are given little public support.

Ireland (1993) concurs with Messner (1988) by suggesting that society continually fails to support its female competitors.

Lack of recognition and support are the most significant problems. This means less ink, less air time, less applause, less fame and adulation. At the professional level of competition, women receive much less money. ~~The female athlete is continually faced~~ with certain "lacks" at many levels. This includes lack of encouragement to compete, lack of family, peer, and financial support, lack of recognition by fans and journalists, and lack of social acceptance. (Ireland 1993, p. 11)

According to Ireland (1993), society creates an unsupportive atmosphere for female athletes by withholding the very same kind of support, encouragement, and recognition that is commonly awarded to male athletes. She suggests that

the absence of societal approval has created extra hurdles for women to overcome if they want to have a positive athletic experience. Similar hurdles do not exist for men.

Another example of one of these extra "hurdles" is that women in sport are commonly viewed as being unfeminine (Kane, 1987). A study by Csizma, Witting, and Schurr (1988) identified that some sports are perceived as more masculine, feminine, or neutral. Sports, such as boxing and football, that exhibit traditional masculine traits like aggressiveness and competitiveness, are seen as much more appropriate for men, whereas sports such as gymnastics, that incorporate traditional feminine traits like grace and beauty, are seen as more appropriate for females. Females who compete in a sport, like ice hockey, that is seen as "inappropriate", are often viewed as less feminine than females who choose to compete in an "appropriate" sport, such as figure skating.

If a women chooses to participate in athletics, her choice of sport cannot be made without considering society's imposed gender affiliations. Kane (1987) found that female athletes were perceived as more attractive than non-athletes, but only if they participated in a sex-appropriate sport such as volleyball. A sport like gymnastics, however, may actually enhance society's perceptions of an athlete's femininity. This is because it is a sport that truly emphasizes the feminine qualities of grace and beauty.

Females who pursue athletics are very aware of society's concern with femininity and sexual orientation. For example, Varpalotai (1987) conducted a study of a girl's athletic

subculture that identified the athletes' awareness of society's stereotypes and the induction process into this awareness.

The locker room was also the scene of noisy 'fooling around', and jokes full of sexual innuendo, and other such 'unlady-like' behavior. The awareness that many female athletes are said to be lesbians was also the topic of jokes and mockery, with a few of the older girls coming dangerously close to the fine line which separates humor and reality in their enactment of homosexual intimacy. This particular episode touched off a wave of homophobia, and generated a great deal of tension among the staff and older campers. The very real sanctions facing sexual 'deviants' was suddenly brought home to a rather somber group when the 'joke' was brought to an end. The realization that sexuality was not a joking matter, particularly within the context of women's sport was a new and profound revelation to many of the participants. (Varpalotai 1987, p. 418)

These girls are part of a society that places sanctions on women who participate in sport. They are acutely conscious of how this could and does impact them. Because they are athletes, their femininity and sexual orientation are often subject to speculation or even assumption. Varpalotai (1987) goes on to suggest the possibility of two "hidden curricula" within the domain of sport. One perpetuates the male domination and the other that challenges and resists it. The popular opinion that the athletic arena is an unnatural place for females coexists with the reality that more and more females are competing regardless of popular opinion.

Females in sport are constantly reminded that society would prefer them to engage in more appropriate activities. This commonly results in women who do not fully or actively incorporate sport into their lives. It is common for a man

to have company softball on Monday and Wednesday nights, or bowling on Tuesday and Thursday nights, whereas for a woman it is not as common. Many girls picture themselves as adults ceasing participation in athletics and assuming their role in society: being married, working full or part time, being responsible for housework and child care, and being involved in sports only through their children (Varpalotai, 1987).

Female athletes simply cannot ignore society's emphasis on the male model in sports and "just compete". If females are going to participate in sports, they must also respond to society's preconceptions about sport because these preconceptions are constantly being reinforced within our culture.

The red carpet has not been rolled out for women in sport. Female athletes are commonly viewed as inferior, unfeminine, and less legitimate. Grudgingly, though, American sport culture is slowly making room for its female competitors. However, the perception that "sport is for men" is still prevalent (Ireland, 1993; Kane, 1987; Csizma et. al, 1988). Those women who choose to compete must overcome a multitude of negative perceptions to achieve any sense of competence or achievement.

The Sports Media

The male-orientation of athletics is strongly echoed within the sports media. As Sabo and Jansen (1992) notably point out,

Male athletes are valorized, lionized, and put on cultural pedestals. They are our modern gladiators: the last heroes left in American popular culture. Visual portrayals of male athletes, often filmed in

slow-motion and framed from the ground up, are cast against soundtracks of roaring crowds or musical fanfares replete with throbbing bass or thundering drums. (p. 174)

Male athletes are depicted as *real* men. They are portrayed as the embodiment of masculine traits because they are seen as strong, aggressive, and seemingly invincible. Thus, sports media cannot detract from the mystique of the male athlete as a superior being.

Sabo and Jansen (1992) also suggest that because of this perception, female athletes are often portrayed as threatening the legitimacy of male athletic competition.

The message was clear in a Federal Express commercial, aired during a post-season bowl game between the Colorado Buffaloes and the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame (January 1, 1991), which depicted a pick-up basketball game among corporate employees designed to "build company morale". The males quickly get serious and aggressive about the game while two females pleaded from courtside, "Can we get in now?" After their third plea, in full frontal frame, a sweaty and enraged male yells "No, not now!" (p. 174)

The message is clear indeed. The game's seriousness and legitimacy are depicted to be threatened if females are allowed to participate. The game should be for men only. It also suggests that females may only compete with the male's approval and may only compete within the male's domain for her to feel her participation is meaningful. The message of female's secondary role in athletics is clear.

Traditional Portrayals of Women in the Sports Media

If a woman or girl still decides to participate in athletics, the sports media essentially ignores or trivializes her efforts (Bryson, 1987). There is no sense of acceptance for sportswomen in the sports media (Graydon,

1987). This lack of recognition and approval of female athletes is accurately reflected in the type of coverage women receive. The amount of coverage provided for female athletes is sorely lacking compared to the amount of male coverage (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1983; Coakley, 1990; Oglesby, 1978). Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) recognized that men's college basketball has regularly been televised nationally during "prime time" hours, whereas women's collegiate basketball, until very recently, has rarely been televised, and only during "off peak" hours. In 1997, the NCAA women's basketball tournament was often televised live. However, to get major coverage, the tournament appeared on a cable channel instead of a network station. This type of coverage leaves the impression that women's sports are less important than their male counterparts.

Not only is female participation trivialized by the amount of coverage, but also by the content of the coverage. Duncan (1993b) identified how male/female power relations are encoded in modern sports media. Her study indicated that the male orientation of sports resulted in men's sporting events being the standard for comparison. Duncan (1993b) suggests that through choices in language women's sporting events are marked as of secondary importance, whereas the corresponding men's event is established as *the* event. The example cited is the *Women's* Final Four, whereas the men's event is referred to as *The* Final Four. Duncan (1993b) also notes that the term "girl" is used more often when referring to adult women than "boy" is used when referring to male adults,

and that photos of women athletes, unlike those of male athletes, were mostly posed, rather than action shots.

Duncan's (1993b) findings supported the results of an earlier content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* conducted by Boutilier and San Giovanni (1983). Specifically they studied the Silver Anniversary Issue, 8/13/79, which was a photo documentary of sports history for the previous quarter-century. The analysis revealed that there were no photos of women for 14 of the 25 years, 58% of the photos of women were passive, non-athletic portraits, and that all 8 sports depicted were individual sports, and that all but two were considered socially acceptable sports. This study suggests that the probability of a attractive female gymnast in a beautiful pose being found on the pages of *Sports Illustrated* was much higher than that of a female soccer player scoring a spectacular goal being pictured anywhere in the magazine.

Cases of female athletes being trivialized in the sports media have also be found by many earlier studies. Examples include a newspaper photo of marathon runner Rosemary Longstaff training behind a stroller (Bryson 1987) and Olympic sprinter Florence Joyner. Joyner, who typically ran in full-makeup and was always accompanied by her husband-coach, was identified as a "particularly attractive personality for television coverage" (Coakley, 1990, p. 292). Both of these images direct our attention away from the athletic qualities these women possess, and instead focus on the feminine qualities. Longstaff and Joyner cannot be simply athletes. They must be athletes who are also either a

mother or a wife. The sports media must connect them to their femininity. By focusing on their "womanly" qualities, the sports media has detracted from the legitimacy and seriousness of their athleticism.

An analysis of a September 1986 issue of *Muscle and Beauty* by Messner (1988), also noted the trend of depicting the female athlete as overtly feminine. Messner (1988) observed that although this magazine covered women's participation in the "masculine" sport of bodybuilding, the editor did not focus purely on female athletic achievements but also on the fact that female athletes can still be feminine. The editor emphasized the idea that muscular female bodybuilders were both beautiful and also still very capable of being mothers. Statements like these, that try to justify female participation, only trivialize and detract from the sportswoman's achievements.

A content analysis of *Women's Sports and Fitness* (Leath & Lumpkin, 1992) found results similar to Bryson (1987). Even though this magazine is dedicated specifically to the coverage of athletic women, recreational athletes were more likely to be pictured on the cover, and if there was a competitive athlete, she was rarely shown "in action", or rarely involved in an aggressive team sport. Leath and Lumpkin (1992) also noted that most of the articles were written by males who used language that often devalued women's sport achievements.

The sports media clearly reflects an attitude that serious and competitive athletic participation equals

masculinity. As Wenner (1989) points out: "The covert gender valuation in the mediated sport marketplace may be one of the strongholds of traditional sexism in a society where such values are losing utility as social roles can less often be equated with gender" (p. 43). Women and girls are not only becoming lawyers and doctors, but are also participating in sports in greater and greater numbers. However, the sports media has overtly ignores this trend. In 1991, the U.S. Women's Soccer team won the first World Championship ever held for women's soccer. The amount of sports media coverage for this achievement was relatively small compared to the amount of coverage being given to the less successful U.S. Men's Soccer team in the 1994 World Cup. Once again, gender dictated the amount, type, and seriousness of the coverage afforded to a group of elite athletes.

There is little debate within the research over the content of sports media. Many content analyses have been done over the past two decades that detail the trivializing portrayal of female athletes. The degradation of the sportswoman's experience has been profound and, until very recently, has seen little change.

Current Trends in the Sports Media's Portrayal of Women

Although slow, there has been an increase of photographs, sport product commercials, and event coverage that apparently try to embrace the sportswoman's experience as important and valid. Since 1995, there have been many sports media examples that portray women from a variety of sports as worthy of recognition and praise. Most notably, the

television commercials and print ads prior to the 1996 Summer Olympic Games highlighting the abilities of the Women's National Basketball Team and Women's Soccer Team. Nike seems to have taken the lead by showing commercials such as one where three members of the basketball team successfully compete against males in a pickup game while the announcer touts that "athletes are athletes". Nike also has a commercial highlighting the talent of the U.S. Women's Soccer Team where the athletes are shown training and playing hard, while pledging their allegiance to each other and towards winning the gold medal in the 1995 World Championships. A final example is a magazine ad for State Farm Insurance that shows a picture of a USA Women's Basketball team member driving to the basket in a slo-mo action shot. The text of the ad strongly emphasizes the athletic ability of these athletes.

"THESE DAYS, Little Girls DON'T LIVE DOWN THE LANE. They DRIVE DOWN IT. Talented, tenacious, and tough to beat. In its continuing support of women's athletics, State Farm is proud to be a sponsor of the 1995-1996 USA Basketball Women's National Team." (*Newsweek* July 8, 1996 p. 37)

These commercials are a far cry from the trivializing portrayals of the past. And, as one would guess, they seem to be enthusiastically embraced by the women and girls they represent.

Things, however, have not changed completely. Despite the efforts by some members of the media to advance the portrayal of women, there have been many more recent portrayals reminiscent of the not so distant past. The same

US Women's Basketball Team that was shown competing on equal level as the guys, was portrayed by *Sears, Inc.* in a commercial, not as athletes, but rather as beautiful consumers of cosmetics, who happen to play basketball too. This commercial used these talented athletes to show viewers "the softer side of Sears." The message being sent to female athletes, however, was one that touted the primary importance of an extremely feminine image, and the secondary importance of her athletic experience. In the 1996 Olympic Special Edition of *Women's Sports and Fitness*, a cover photo and almost every photo inside of three Olympic athletes were static poses, none of which showed any of the three playing their sport. One of the most notable photos was of all three athletes posing together on the beach wearing sports bras and athletic shorts. It was reminiscent of *Sports Illustrated's* annual swimsuit edition.

While coverage has increased, there is still far more coverage of men's sports than of women's, and far more coverage of "appropriate" sports than of other sports. Because of the influential nature of the media, this type of persistent sexism may have significant consequences.

Influential Role of the Sports Media on People's Opinions

While the media cannot dictate our views, it provides information that plays an integral part in shaping and influencing our perceptions of reality (Coakley, 1990; Theberge, 1991). This influence is an integral part of sports media, as Jhally (1989) points out;

Television does not present us with a sports event but with a sports event...that is mediated by

television. A sports event is live and unscripted, and television is forced to provide its own structures and ideological viewpoints in a unique way. Directors, producers, camera operators, editors, and commentators are inserted between the live event and the home audience (p. 82).

Through this process of mediation, the sports media influences the public's perception of the credibility or importance of an event or issue. The producers of a sporting event can increase the perceived importance of the event through "'insiders gossip' about the players, coaches, strategies, and historical content," (Wenner, 1989, p.15). McCombs, Einsiedel, and Weaver's (1991) discussion about the role of the media in setting the public's political agenda suggests that newspapers and broadcasters are very capable of influencing the salience of an issue. By influencing the relevance or importance of a particular issue or event, the media shapes individual responses towards that issue or event. The power of the media is certainly significant.

Another aspect of the sports media that enhances its power to influence society's opinions is its high accessibility. Television news broadcasts and daily newspapers have substantial sports sections every day of the week, whereas the arts section is commonly produced only once a week. Entire magazines, radio shows, television stations, and books are often dedicated to the sole promotion of sports. Very few Americans, if any, have never come across an issue of *Sports Illustrated* or have never viewed an athletic event on television. As Wenner (1989) notes, "Whether a sports fan or not, every individual in America is

to some extent influenced by the communication of sports culture. Mediated sports culture is an inescapable reality, forming part of the context of every American's life," (p. 16). Sports media is seemingly everywhere in America. With the introduction of cable television, a person can be a spectator almost any hour of the day or night. Most people use the media to view sports rather than going to a sporting event (Jhally, 1989). Although exposure to the sports media seems inescapable, a study by Gantz and Wenner (1991) identified that men and women view televised sports differently. They found that men tended to become more emotionally involved with their viewing. However, this study also suggests that as female participation becomes more acceptable, females may begin to respond more strongly to sports media.

Role Models and the Sports Media

Real (1989) and Pecora (1992) suggest that the sports media, because of its high accessibility, is a consistent source of role models for behavior. "We learn from these heroes, real or fantasy, the rules of life: what is acceptable, desirable, attractive, successful, and possible," (Pecora, 1992, p. 62). Real (1989) even suggests that without the sports media there would be nothing available to encourage the next generation of star athletes. Real (1989) uses the example of a young Mary Lou Retton being inspired by watching Nadia Comaneci perform on television. Would Mary Lou have ever known about Nadia without the sports media? Would Mary Lou have ever won an Olympic Gold without the

sports media?

The number of female role models presented in the sports media, however is far smaller than the number of male role models, and this could have an adverse effect on females' perceptions of themselves as athletes. In a study of girl's sport subculture, Varpalotai (1987) found that most of the girls preferred male coaches because female coaches were viewed as "wimpy" and less knowledgeable. Varpalotai (1987) attributed this perception to the lack of visible competent female role models and cited the girls' preference for male coaches as an example of the "tension and contradiction, inhibiting girls' sport from being truly woman-defined" (p.420). The visibility of competent female role models is partly controlled by the sports media. Perhaps if these same girls had seen more female coaches competing in their sport on television, they would have developed more positive attitudes towards women in sport.

The media is, however, only one source of information that influences our beliefs and perceptions. Interactions, experiences, and the environment also help to form perceptions of self (Real, 1989). As Strate (1992) points out, "Biology determines whether we are male or female; culture determines what it *means* to be male or female, and what sorts of behavior and personality attributes are appropriate for each gender role" (p.79). Real (1989) proposes that from the moment people are born, they form their perceptions of self through interactions on three levels. The first is with other persons, such as parents,

siblings, and neighbors. The second is with the items found in the environment such as the crib, room, house, grass, and pets. Finally, Real (1989) suggests that the third type of interaction is with the media. A child is exposed at an early age to the media through stories read to him or her, and through television programs such as *Sesame Street*, or *Wonder Woman*. Findings also indicate that the impact of the media may be particularly strong on children's behavior and self-image because, unlike adults, they do not have a well-developed ability to filter what they are exposed to (Chafetz, 1978). "For adults the reevaluation of social roles comes from relationships, conversations, and social situations. For children, such learning comes from parents, peers, and the media," (Pecora, 1992, p.62).

Because of the acknowledged influence of the media, researchers have often expressed concern that the overwhelming male orientation in sports media may have a very negative effect on girls' and women's sport experience (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1983; Theberge, 1991). If the sports media continues to trivialize female participation, will female athletes view their accomplishments as trivial? If the sports media continues to ignore female participation, will female athletes view the athletic arena as a place they are not welcome? These are legitimate concerns because if a female's sport experience is negative, there could be a significant impact on her self-perceptions.

Sport and Self-Perceptions

A plethora of research has explored the influence of

sport on the development of self-perceptions (Horn & Hasbrook, 1986; Klint & Weiss, 1987; Weiss & Horn, 1990; Weiss, Bredemeier, & Shewchuk, 1986). This work has primarily focused on the theoretical frameworks proposed by Harter (1978; 1981) and Bandura (1986). Harter's (1978) competence-motivation model suggests that perceptions of competence are intricately linked with future motivation. These self-perceptions are primarily influenced by the outcome of mastery attempts. She suggests that if a person attempts a task and is successful, then there will be a positive effect upon that person's self-perception of ability. The opposite, she proposes, is also true. An unsuccessful attempt at a task will have a negative effect on self-perceptions of ability and subsequent motivation. Harter (1978) also identified the socializing environment, or "significant others", as a secondary factor in the development of self-perceptions. She argues that positive or negative reinforcement from peers, coaches, parents, or others will also significantly impact a person's perception of competence and self-worth.

Harter's (1990) later conceptualization of self-worth proposed that the specific social component of "significant others" plays an integral part in the development of an athlete's self-perceptions by influencing both the perceived importance of an activity and the athlete's perceived ability (Harter, 1990; Weiss, 1987). The influence of "significant others" on self-perceptions is an area of particular interest within the extensive literature on athlete's self-perceptions

and self-concept (Harter, 1990).

In addition to Harter, Bandura (1986) has proposed that while performance accomplishments, which are parallel to Harter's mastery attempts, are the strongest influence on self-perceptions, the experience of others is also a vital contributor. This influence, identified as vicarious experience, can take the form of role models or visual representations of others. Bandura (1986) proposes, and research (Gould & Weiss, 1981) has supported, that the more similar the model the greater potential influence on self-perceptions. A third source of efficacy or competence information proposed by Bandura is verbal persuasion, or feedback from significant others.

Based on previous theoretical propositions by Harter and Bandura, self-perceptions of ability are developed primarily through three sources of information: mastery attempts or performance accomplishments, modeled actions, and information from significant others. The weight of each of these factors has been disputed. However, due to the self-referenced nature of performance accomplishments, this source is typically viewed as the strongest influence.

A great deal of research has focused on the role of performance accomplishment; however fewer studies have examined the impact of significant others. Klint and Weiss (1987) employed Harter's (1978) model of competence motivation in a study of youth gymnasts, and found that the social interactions provided by sport participation had a significant impact on an athlete's self-perceptions and

motivation to participate. Weiss (1993) also notes that it has been well established in the literature that children seem to hold input, often in the form of feedback and evaluation, from significant others in especially high regard.

The results of a study by Ebbeck and Stuart (1993) strongly support the influence of significant others on self-worth. This study focused on a sample of 100 male football players who were 11-14 years old. Findings indicated that significant others influence perceptions of importance and perceptions of competence. This study further suggested that both of these perceptions also significantly affected the athlete's development of self-perceptions of ability.

Sport impacts people's perceptions of themselves. The primary influence on their self-perceptions is their own personal experience in competition. The secondary influential factor within sport is interactions with significant others. These significant others are representatives of society. They are coaches, parents, peers, and other role models. There is, therefore, a societal impact on an athlete's self-perception.

Sports Media as a "Significant Other"

Although most of the earlier research in the field of sport psychology has defined a "significant other" as either a coach, teacher, or parent (Weiss, 1993; Harter, 1990; Ebbeck & Stuart 1993), many researchers in other fields have referred to the media in the context of a significant other (Fejes, 1992; McCombs et al., 1991; Pecora, 1992; Real, 1989;

Sabo & Jansen, 1992; Strate, 1992; and Wenner, 1989;) Pecora (1992) based her analysis of *Superman* comics on the assumption that "the media are important sources of social rules and courtesies" (p. 61). Sabo and Jansen (1992) regarded mediated sport as a venue where societal norms and inequities were reproduced, legitimized, and reinforced. Real (1989) even stated that:

"mediated experiences influence the child's developing sense of personal identity in the same ways in which interaction with other persons and the environment does," (p.15-16).

Just as coaches and peers can influence perceptions of importance, which in turn affect a person's self-perceptions, so can the sports media.

The sports media has also been recognized as a source of role models (Pecora, 1992; Real, 1989; Varpalotai, 1987). Vicarious experiences, such as those represented by role models, have also been identified in previous self-perception research as significantly influencing the athlete's self-perceptions (Bandura, 1986). The link between the sports media and role models has been established (Pecora, 1992; Real, 1989; Varpalotai, 1987), and the link between role models and self-perceptions has been established (Bandura, 1986; Harter, 1990; Weiss, 1987). It seems logical, therefore, that there is a link between the sports media and self-perceptions.

Assumed Impact of the Sports Media on Female Athletes

The overwhelming male-orientation in both the sports world and the sports media has led many sports media researchers to surmise that the resulting effect on the

female athlete's self-worth must be negative (Theberge, 1991; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Because women and girls are portrayed as less important and less capable, it is proposed that they will automatically incorporate those beliefs into their perceptions of competence and self-worth.

Theberge (1991), for example, conducted a content analysis of print sports media in Canada that identified a strong consistent male-orientation in these publications. Theberge (1991) suggested that these results "indicate the importance of an alternative and especially a feminist perspective to challenge the dominant messages and images the media presents on gender, sport and physical activity" (p. 47).

Duncan (1993a) points out that "many of these scholars have concluded their studies with a call for the sports media to redress inequities in the ways in which they present sporting women versus sporting men," (p. 354). Duncan and Brummett (1993), however, point out that these beliefs are based almost solely on assumptions rather than research. Specifically, Duncan and Brummett (1993) identify two assumptions that are commonly used to explain the relationship between the sports media and its female audience.

First, they suggest that is commonly assumed that "sport media texts whose ideologies are sexist must necessarily disempower women and girls" (p. 58). When females see themselves portrayed as inferior, the typical presumption is that they must internalize the sports media's message that

they are inferior, and that sports media must only have a negative effect on females' self-perceptions. Secondly, they suggest that it is also commonly assumed that the audience can only interpret one meaning from the content or text of mediated sport. If a text is sexist, then everyone "sees" only the sexism and there is no way to choose or discriminate between meanings. This implies that the audience has very little control over what they are exposed to by the media, because the text is both deterministic and univocal. Duncan and Brummett (1993) suggest that previous sports media researchers focused only on content analysis and made assumptions about the effects on female athletes without ever directly researching the effects on the female athletes themselves.

Interestingly, some "corrective" actions have been taken by a small number of media producers that are based on these assumptions. Theberge's (1987) content analysis of the film "Just for Me", produced by the National Film Board of Canada and Fitness and Amateur Sport Canada, found that the film's content blatantly advocated the idea that physical activity for females is "not only appropriate but desirable and can lead to a more positive sense of self and physical well being" (p.390). Just as there is no sports media research to confirm the idea that negative sports media productions will adversely influence female athletes' self-perceptions, there is also no sports media research to confirm that positive sports media productions, such as "Just for Me", will positively influence female's perceptions of themselves as

athletes. This film is a good example of how significant "corrective" actions are being based purely on assumption, and could therefore be futile efforts with good intentions.

It appears that society, as sports media researchers have suggested, adheres to the belief that positive portrayals of female athletes lead to more positive experiences for all female athletes. Previous sports media research has assumed that because the sports media has historically voiced such a trivializing message concerning the sportswomen experience, that there must be negative effects on female athletes' self-efficacy, self-confidence, or self-worth. It seems the media is also slowly buying into this assumption by occasionally reversing the message within its content, apparently with the hope of attracting a more diverse and enthusiastic consumer and viewing audience.

Both of these assumptions, that a trivializing message unequivocally disempowers female viewers and that a supportive message unequivocally empowers female viewers, are built upon a singular premise. The message professed by the sports media must be univocal and deterministic. A viewer is relegated to whatever position the sports media establishes. As pointed out by Duncan and Brummett (1993), this assumption is made without scientific support.

The Research "Gap" Between Sports Media and the Athlete's Interpretation

There is almost a complete absence of research within the sports media literature that directly examines the relationship between the sports media and the audience. In

fact, only two studies (Bruce, 1993; Duncan & Brummett, 1993) have investigated previous sports media researchers' assumptions concerning this relationship. The bulk of sports media research assumes that the content of the sports media must be univocal and that it is impossible for the viewer to discern different interpretations of the text. It has been suggested that if the sports media presents female athletes' experiences as inherently less important than their male counterparts, then the female viewers must internalize that message and validate it. The reverse has also been suggested. For the sportsman, the heroic and mythical message of athletic superiority asserted by the likes of *Sports Illustrated* does nothing other than perpetuate the male hegemony and preserve athletics as the bastion of male superiority. Although it is a logical line of reasoning, it is astounding that so much power and influence has been attributed to the sports media, and so little to the viewer.

A review of media research by Fejes (1992) also dismissed assumed effects. "While content studies show fairly conclusively that the media replicate and reinforce traditional versions of masculinity, the question of the impact of the media is a far less settled question," (Fejes, 1992, p. 19). The only exception Fejes (1992) notes has been in the research concerning pornography, where it was identified that after exposure to violent and/or degrading pornography, men tended to incorporate a feeling of callousness toward women into their definition of masculinity.

Duncan (1993a) extended this reasoning: "It is time to go beyond our present level of sports media analysis by identifying the formal structures that give rise to individual texts," (p. 353). By identifying and understanding how the sports media operates within a patriarchal structure, then viewers will be able to reject text interpretations based upon the same structure.

An awareness of how formal resemblances in structure and text enhance dominant readings is an important tool in undercutting ideologies like patriarchy. If we wish to combat women's oppression, we must identify the institutions and the technologies and practices that produce and reproduce patriarchal ideology. (Duncan, 1993a, p.369)

She argues that because sports media presentations are created within a formal patriarchal structure, that these presentations encourage a patriarchal interpretation. If this formalized structure is identified, then perhaps a patriarchal interpretation won't be as appealing. Duncan (1993a) also recognizes that such an interpretation, regardless of how forward it appears to be, should not necessarily be regarded as the only interpretation possible within the text.

Whether readers do interpret the *SI* swimsuit issue according to its dominant (patriarchal) meaning is another matter entirely. Other readings are possible; for example, the formal association of women with sports equipment, or in Olympic contexts, may for some readers reinforce the idea that women and sports go together. The concrete meanings that particular readers give to such a magazine is a matter for empirical investigation and is beyond the scope of this investigation. (p. 369)

Although Duncan (1993a) recognizes that it may be possible for viewers to reject the preferred reading and find

different, and sometimes opposite, meanings within the text, her research is still based upon the assumption that the preferred, patriarchal reading must have a significant impact on the audience. Otherwise, what would be the point of formally deconstructing the text to identify *how* the sports media creates this preferred patriarchal reading? Duncan (1993a) assumes that the preferred reading does have an impact on its audience, but there is hardly any sports media research to date that directly examines this question.

In fact, there is almost a complete absence of sports media research that directly examines the relationship between sports media and the female or male athlete's perceptions of self-worth. This is especially curious due to the fact that women and girls are actively involved in many diverse sporting experiences despite the sports media's sexist portrayal of female athletes. Duncan and Brummett (1993) even ask "how is it that members [women] are *capable* of participating at all in sport?" (p. 58, italics added) If the sports media is consistently relaying the message that women and girls cannot be serious athletes, then how do female athletes justify their own existence?

First Steps in Filling the "Gap"

Research in other academic fields, while limited, has more directly examined the relationship between the media and the audience. Perhaps the most notable theory to date has been Stuart Hall's communication model of encoding/decoding (Hall, 1980). This model suggests that the sender first encodes a message with an intended meaning. The

encoding process is determined by beliefs, experiences, and intentions. The message is then sent to the receiver either through verbal communication, sign language, body language etc. The receiver then must decode the message to determine the meaning. Just like the encoding process, the decoding process is based upon a person's experiences and beliefs. Most significantly, Hall's model suggests that due to the encoding/decoding process, the *intended* message may never be received. Hall suggests that messages must be interpreted, and that some or all of the intended meaning may be lost or misconstrued through the interpretation process. This model suggests that the media's message is not univocal and deterministic because every person will inherently interpret things differently due to their different experiences and beliefs. This communications research theory directly challenges the dominant way of thinking within the sports media research.

Most of the related sports media research has focused on whether women could achieve empowerment despite the male domination of sport and sports media. Researchers questioned if women could feel competent and sustain a proactive approach to life within an environment that consistently devalued female abilities. These empowering qualities, perceived competence and a proactive approach to life, are also representative of positive self-perceptions.

A study by Blinde, Taub, and Han (1993) gave some insight as to how women are empowered through sport. The researchers conducted telephone interviews with 24 female

collegiate athletes that suggested these women achieved three empowering qualities through their sport experience. These qualities were: 1) bodily competence, 2) perceptions of a competent self, and 3) a proactive approach to life. Blinde et al. (1993) also identified several disempowering forces that coexist such as homophobia, discrimination, and pressure to win. The researchers also noted that due to the limitations of their sample, these findings could only be generalized to white female athletes receiving athletic scholarships. This study also only examined female athletes who were adult women competing at a high level of competition. If female empowerment in a male dominated society is possible, as the research by Blinde, Taub, and Han (1993) suggests, then couldn't that same empowerment possibly be achieved through the male dominated sports media which is a product of a male dominated society?

A study by Duncan and Brummett (1993) examined this new question by directly incorporating the sports media into their research. They explored if, and how women were able to empower themselves while watching televised football. Their results identified two possible methods of empowerment available to these women. Radical empowerment, defined as rejecting the "preferred" readings of the text, seemed to be the most common method. A "preferred" reading was defined as the message or meaning the text relayed as content analysis suggested. The women in this study renounced the male-oriented reading of the text by using sarcasm, irony, and indifference toward the game. This blatant refusal to submit

to the preferred reading resulted in an increased sense of empowerment. Liberal empowerment was defined as a process of mediation where the women used, instead of rejecting, the text as a means of empowerment. Duncan and Brummett (1993) found that a few of these women empowered themselves by either using television as means of extension that enabled them to experience the game, or as an opportunity to display knowledge.

Bruce (1993) in an unpublished study also directly examined women watching televised sports. Bruce's investigation, however, analyzed women watching women's basketball. This was an interesting extension of Duncan and Brummett's (1993) study of women watching football. Like Duncan and Brummett (1993), Bruce (1993) also found that women were able to resist the preferred meaning of the televised text and determine their own interpretation. Similarly, Bruce (1993), suggests that the sports media is not univocal and that women are not destined to internalize the intended message. Bruce (1993) identified several ways in which the women she studied resisted the "general devaluation of the women's game" by the sports media. These women resisted the intended meaning by 1) valuing women's basketball more than men's, 2) developing expert knowledge of the women's game, and 3) investing emotionally in televised women's basketball.

Through examination of the use of sports media as a source of empowerment for women, Duncan and Brummett (1993) have started to address the issue of sports media effects on self-

worth. Bruce's (1993) study also takes another step towards better understanding the relationship between the female audience and the sports media. However, future research needs to focus more extensively on the relationship between the sports media and its audience, as well as different populations such as children and adolescents.

Purpose of This Study

So the question remains unanswered. Is the assumption that the sports media has a singular deterministic effect upon its viewers valid? What truly is the relationship between the viewer and the sports media? Although it seems that female athletes generally prefer the positive direction that some forms of the sports media are taking, is there any other impact on them aside from a viewing preference? Are these "corrective" steps being taken by the media going to have any impact on how these athletes view their athletic experience, their importance, or influence their motivation to participate? One can only guess. There is very little previous sports media research to base any predictions on. It can only be assumed that it probably can't hurt, and that somehow, might help. At any rate, it is probably better than the previous portrayals.

The studies by Blinde et al. (1993), Bruce (1993), and Duncan and Brummett (1993) are an encouraging step towards the process of validating or rejecting the commonly held assumption that the present content of sports media has a negative impact on the female athlete's self-worth and self-perceptions. All three of these studies, however, focus on

adult women who, according to Chafetz (1978), have the capability, unlike children, to consciously accept or reject societal values. Future sports media research should also consider that Blinde et al. (1993) did not directly address the sports media, but rather the entire male hegemony of sport, and Duncan and Brummett (1993) chose football, an extreme example of male-oriented sport and one that very few females can directly relate their own athletic experiences to.

Although it is important to note that the male orientation of sports media may also have an effect on young male athletes (Wenner, 1989), the purpose of this study is to examine the intersection of sports media representations and young female athletes' self-perceptions. The main questions driving this research are: What consequence does this male-orientation in newspapers, books, television, magazines, radio, and movies have on the girls participating in sports who are exposed to this type of sports media? What is the impact of mass sports media coverage on their self-perceptions as athletes? When young female athletes read the sports page, watch television, listen to the radio, or pick up a magazine and the only athletes who are portrayed as important are male, what is the effect on those female athletes' self perceptions?

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Approach

There is very little existing research that examines the intersection of sports media representations and young female athletes' self-perceptions. Because this phenomenon is relatively unexplored, this project has focused on gaining a better understanding of this area rather than proving a hypothesis. Due to this premise of discovery rather than confirmation, the researcher employed qualitative methods in this study.

The primary source of data was in-depth, open-ended interviews because this tool allowed for the greatest amount of disclosure and learning. The researchers' first questions were not necessarily the "correct" questions. Since there are no established areas of inquiry within the literature to explore the relationship between the sports media and young female athletes' self-perceptions, open-ended interviews enabled the researcher to define this relationship and identify new areas of inquiry.

Participants

The initial participant group consisted of eighteen fourteen year-old female soccer players. Fourteen individuals from this group agreed to be interviewed. These participants were all members of the New Hampshire Olympic Development Program, which is designed to train exceptional youth soccer players. Their soccer playing experience ranged

from five to ten years of participation. This group of athletes was chosen for several reasons. First, their participation in the Olympic Development Program demonstrates a strong commitment to participate in sports at a competitive level. Second, previous research has suggested that children of this age are still exposed to and influenced by sports media during their sports participation (Real, 1989; Chafetz, 1978). Finally, these girls are at an age where many of their peers are deciding to cease participation in athletics, and so it is very likely that these individuals have seriously considered the benefits and drawbacks of participation.

These participants were also coached by the researcher for a period of approximately seven months. The majority of the interviews were conducted during the last month of the season, and the remaining interviews were conducted within three months of the end of the season. During the seven month period, the researcher typically coached the subjects once a week for about two hours. The researcher also coached the team during an overnight Olympic Development tournament and during a week-long Olympic Development training camp. The majority of the interviews were conducted during this camp in the last month of training. During this lengthy induction period, the coach/researcher was given an opportunity to create a strong sense of trust and rapport with the subjects. This established relationship between the subjects and the researcher encouraged openness and frankness during the interview process, and potentially enhanced the

quality of data. The rationale behind this approach was that adolescents may be more likely to share thoughts and concerns more honestly and freely with someone they feel comfortable with.

The use of human participants in this project received approval from the Internal Review Board at the University of New Hampshire, and permission for participation was obtained from both the participants and the participants' parents or guardians through an informed consent form.

Interview Format

The format for the formal interviews was developed by reviewing the literature on sports media representations of female athletes and the literature on self-perceptions. After reviewing these two sources, the researcher then identified five general areas of inquiry for the formal interview. These areas consisted of: a) personal playing history; b) self-perceptions of themselves as an athlete; c) perceptions of role models; d) perceptions of the sports media; and e) relationship with the media. The purpose of this project was primarily one of discovery in a relatively unexplored area, and therefore, these identified areas of inquiry were only considered a starting point for the researcher. In the interest of promoting the greatest amount of discovery, the researcher allowed the areas of inquiry to develop and change as the formal interviews progressed.

Prior to the formal interviews, brief informal notes were kept by the researcher on any observations and casual conversations that seemed relevant. The purpose of these

informal notes was to identify potential areas of inquiry for the formal interviews.

Procedures

The researcher gained entry into the participant group by assuming the role of head coach. This was designed to enhance the process of familiarization between the researcher and the subjects. Before formal interviews were conducted, signed informed consent forms were obtained from all participants. The researcher also reviewed the literature on interviewing techniques, and conducted two practice interviews with volunteers outside of the project's subject group using the project's interview schedule. The researcher's interview technique during these practice interviews was critiqued by both the researcher and the researcher's advisor.

The formal interviews were conducted in a setting that was as private and quiet as possible. The site of each interview varied depending on the availability of the subject and the researcher. The interviews varied in length from approximately twenty minutes to forty-five minutes, and each was audiotaped.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and assigned a code to ensure confidentiality. The key for subjects' names and their corresponding code were kept in a secured place. The transcriptions and the interview tapes were also secured.

Analysis

The analysis of the data utilized qualitative methodologies and consisted of a process that systematically

reduced the data into "chunks" that could be interpreted. First, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim. This facilitated the organization and reduction of data.

Next, the researcher became very familiar with the transcripts by reading them several times. During these readings the researcher marked passages in each transcript that were of particular interest to the researcher. The determination of salience was guided by thematic suggestions found within the literature and represented in the initial interview schedule. The researcher acknowledges that there are themes that are not represented within the existing literature, and that decisions on the salience and inclusion of text was often governed by the researcher's predisposition and bias. For these reasons, the marking of text consciously erred on the side of inclusion.

The highlighted "chunks" of text were then labeled to represent a theme in the research. These themes may have recurred throughout all the interviews or may have only surfaced once. The researcher recognizes that due to the small size of the subject group, there may be themes that seem contradictory or singular. However, these themes were determined to hold significance for the population as a whole. Therefore, the researcher was careful not to "force" a marked passage into a category, but rather gave careful consideration as to the possible uniqueness of a passage. The researcher also recognized that the identification of themes evolved throughout the analysis. A theme that may have initially seemed important, often lost or changed its

relative significance over the course of analysis.

Chunks of text were then grouped together by label and coded as to its origin with the page number of the original transcript. This coding process enabled the researcher to easily return to the passage in full context for further review if necessary. Finally, the researcher reviewed the themes and drew conclusions, made connections, and theorized about the nature of the relationship between the sports media and the young female athlete.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to extend previous sports media research which has focused on content analysis, and to examine the effects of these representations on the self-perceptions of female athletes. We know conclusively that the inherent message within the sports media has traditionally trivialized the sport experience of girls and women. What we didn't know was the effect these representations in the sports media had on the young female audience. Prior to the current investigation, no sports media research has focused on this specific issue. Previous content analyses of the sports media have shown that there has traditionally been limited support for female participation in athletics. It has been assumed that this type of exclusive message must be univocal and have a negative effect on the female audience. It has also been assumed that if the sports media reversed the message within its content, then the effects would also be reversed. These assumptions, however, have been made without adequate data to support them. This study was designed to examine the validity of these assumptions by creating a greater understanding of the relationship between the sports media and this particular group of young female athletes.

Unique Characteristics of Participants and the Sport of Soccer

When reviewing and analyzing the data collected from this study, the distinctive characteristics of the participant group and the nature of the American soccer culture must be considered. This study involved a small group of fourteen year-old girls, from a relatively unique background, interacting within a very atypical American sport culture. Therefore, any conclusions drawn from this data must be made within the context of this situation.

Unlike many of their peers, these girls had attained a recognized elite status through their selection to and participation in the Olympic Development Program (ODP) for youth soccer. The "title" of being an ODP player inherently reinforced their perceptions of being successful and good at what they're doing. Although, it should be noted that this particular state's ODP program was not commonly viewed as being very competitive with the other states in the region. Typically, players from this state are not selected for the ODP regional team each year, and so these players were very aware that they were "big fish in a little pond." However, the legitimizing effect of their ODP identification cannot be ignored. It is certainly an acknowledgement of skill proficiency. Successful sport participation is also likely to have a positive impact on self-efficacy and self-worth. It is possible, therefore, that the levels of pride and confidence within this particular group of athletes may be uncharacteristically high when compared to the general

population of fourteen year-old female athletes.

The other unique factor within this study is the culture within the American soccer community itself. Soccer, in the United States, is unlike most other sports in our country in that there are few distinctions between the women's game of soccer and the men's game of soccer. The rules are the same. The tactics are the same. In essence, it is the *same* game, and it is commonly perceived to be so.

This is not true for many other sports. For example, men's and women's lacrosse are two completely different games. The rules, the tactics, and even the flow of the game are all extremely different. The two games do not even look the same. In men's lacrosse the participants all wear shoulder pads, elbow pads, helmets, and use different length sticks depending on their position. Aside from the goalie, women's lacrosse players do not wear any of the same protective equipment as men's lacrosse players, and instead wear kilts. Also, the sticks used by the women are all of similar length. In men's lacrosse the stick length of each participant is determined primarily by the position the player is filling. In men's lacrosse, there are defined boundaries, legal forms of body checking, and "on-the-fly" substitutions. In women's lacrosse there are no absolute boundaries, there is no legal form of body checking, and substitutions are only made at official breaks in play. You could not even play a men's lacrosse game on a women's lacrosse field, and vice-versa, because the fields are lined differently.

Having a sport evolve into two different versions, one for men and one for women, is not unusual. Gender defined differences are found within ice hockey, baseball (the women's version is even named differently), and gymnastics as well as others. There are also sports that have been traditional pastimes of one gender or the other such as football and field hockey.

In soccer, the men's game and the women's game are the same game. The rules, tactics, equipment, and even the "look" of the game are the same. In fact, many youth and adult recreational teams are co-ed. Soccer coaches of both male and female teams attend the same certification courses together, and it is recognized that a female player can learn by watching a men's game just as a male player can learn by watching a women's game.

The only general differences between the two games is that the men's game is played by people with more speed and power. Men have physiological and biomechanical advantages that allow them to be faster and stronger than women. This enables men to occasionally produce displays of "rocket shots" and "blazing runs" that the typical female player cannot replicate. The nature of soccer, however, does not allow these types of physical displays to become a defining difference between the men's and women's game, like it has in basketball, for example. Men's basketball is played "above the rim;" women's is played below. Men's basketball is a fast-break, 1v1 battle, whereas women's basketball is more tactical and team oriented. Soccer, though, is a game of

finesse, pace, rhythm, timing and control. Soccer simply cannot be played as fast and as powerfully as the physical talents of the participants would allow. The physical attributes that are more widely valued in soccer are quickness and agility, and they are not gender biased. Soccer demands restraint and mastery. Soccer is, by its nature, essentially the same for women and men. Soccer is soccer.

This "sameness" has produced a grass-roots culture in America that loves "The Great Game", and pays little heed to gender when assigning value. The same play that would be deemed "brilliant" in a women's game would also be deemed brilliant in a men's game. Displays of great skill are valued more highly than displays of brute force or speed, and there aren't any soccer skills that are gender-specific. Even the coveted bicycle kick can be utilized by anyone with enough skill. Because of this "sameness", and because the culture of soccer values skill over strength, both the men's game and the women's game are often described as beautiful.

This group of girls has been identified as an elite group of participants in a sport that is not summarily dismissed as being inferior to the men's game. This sense of being equally valued and highly successful has produced a very unique participant group. As a whole, most American female athletes are socialized to believe that no matter how successful they are in a sport, their success is inherently inferior to a male's success. The women's world record in the 100 meter sprint will always be slower than the men's

record and is therefore perceived to be second best. This type of hierarchy is not evidenced within the soccer community, although it may be within the general culture unfamiliar with soccer. The self-perceptions of these athletes may therefore be very different than those of other female athletes; however their perceptions of the sports media may be more reflective of other adolescent female athletes.

The State of the Sports Media

The impressions these participants had about the sports media strongly paralleled the findings of the previous content analyses done by investigators (Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1993; Coakley, 1990; Oglesby, 1978; Duncan, 1993; Messner, 1988). Every major characteristic identified by sports media researchers was reaffirmed by these young athletes.

The primary characteristic identified in this study regarding the relationship between the sports media and women's sport experience was an absence of equitable coverage. This inequity was principally identified by a simple lack of coverage combined with the trivialization of the limited exposure. Almost all of these participants commented on this topic much like the following athlete did.

BB: Not much, they don't have much, like, sometimes they might have, like, I've never seen women on the cover of [a] magazine, they're always like in the little side panel or something...They're never like the star, they're never like the center of attention for any magazine or any news broadcast or anything.

Not only did these athletes frequently find their search for

media coverage about women playing sports futile, but they were also hard-pressed to find any coverage that would be considered substantial, in-depth, or diverse.

FF: ...maybe the ones that are visible are the same ones over and over again, like Michelle Akers-Stahl...Never changes. Same one, again and again.

Many of these athletes also noticed the same thing. This group of girls found that the coverage of women playing sports was often very predictable. Articles and photographs would usually be of the same superstar female athletes again and again, and were often limited to what would be considered "gender appropriate" activities such as cheerleading, figure skating, or gymnastics. They found it difficult to find any coverage of soccer and particularly difficult to find any coverage of women's soccer.

It seems obvious that young female athletes would naturally look for other girls and women playing their sport and notice when their search came up relatively empty. However, for such a young audience, these athletes have acquired fairly complex observation skills. They not only noticed that the amount of coverage of women in sports versus men in sports was much less, but they also noticed different methods the sports media used to trivialize the female sporting experience. They were acutely aware that the sports media limits the variety of female athletes it covers, airs women's sporting events at non-prime-time slots, and in general, presents male sporting events in significantly different ways. As one particularly insightful girl put it:

FF: Well they just show it so differently...Well, let's think, I've never really seen...like for

instance in the magazine I was reading they had this thing...and the girl playing was considered a tomboy, and the whole thing was about tomboys are good, that it's okay to be a tomboy. Meanwhile...it's never considered a bad thing if you're a man and you're an athlete, but if you're a woman and you're an athlete it's always like you're an exception. When in reality there are a lot people, a lot of women, who like to play sports just as much as men.

This individual not only noticed that the reference to tomboys was off the mark, but also pointed out that men would never be represented in the same light. "...It's always like you're an exception. When in reality...." It is this viewing behavior that has led this group of sports media consumers to be a very critical and observant audience. These girls were very aware something was missing, and were very sure of what they did see.

Attitudes About The State of the Sports Media

These in-depth observations about the current state of the sports media, combined with their own perceptions of their personal sport experience, have inevitably led to these young consumers professing some rather strong feelings and perceptions about the sports media's credibility.

Often, the sports media was referred to as being flatly inaccurate and unfair by many of these girls. The sentiment expressed in the previous quote, "...when in reality...", were echoed by the most of these athletes. The sports media was often viewed by this group as portraying an inaccurate picture of females in sport.

KK: Definitely, there's one ad on TV, in particular, and it's a McDonald's ad, and they say how they support, um, youth athletes and they show about 25 young soccer players and there are only 2 girls in that whole video...It makes it look like only

boys can play soccer and that's so wrong, because obviously girls can play. Look at all the girls just at this camp that are incredible and the women's world cup team and everything.

This particular young female athlete was able to watch this commercial, recognize the inherent message within the text of the commercial, and then, based upon her own experience, reject the preferred reading of the text. In fact, there is little ambivalence in her response; "...that's so wrong...". This is a rather sophisticated viewing behavior, and yet it was not uncommon within this participant group. Time and time again, these girls refused to subscribe to the messages within the sports media that: a) their sporting experience was less important than any male's, and b) girls do not participate in athletics as often as boys.

Throughout these interviews it became very apparent that these young female athletes felt that their sporting experience was just as important as any male's sporting experience, and should be valued as such. As a group they were very proud of their accomplishments as soccer players. This may be attributed, in part, to their participation in the Olympic Development Program, and the unique culture of American soccer. These young athletes consistently made it clear that they had a very strong positive feeling about their participation in athletics, and they felt very justified in doing so. Because they deeply believed the participation of females in sport *should be* just as valued as men's, they were overtly frustrated that the sports media did not seem to support this idea of equality.

KK: It's the same way in every sport. Just look at

basketball. They have an NBA and it's all men and they have a professional women's league and you've never seen them on TV. I mean every once in a while on a strange channel that no one watches...I think the NCAA finals...coverage for the men is about 4 times as much as the coverage for the women, and they're all working the same amount and the women deserve the credit too...The only women's sports they ever show on TV practically, are bowling and golf and actually bowling and golf get the most coverage for women's sports [laugh] and no one watches those!

J: Why do you think they pick those two?

KK: I don't know. Maybe if they're sexist maybe they think women can handle those because both of those... they involve a lot skill but they don't involve a lot of power.

This athlete believed that the effort and demonstration of skill put forth by both male and female basketball players was equal. The failure of the sports media to recognize that equality certainly annoyed, at a minimum, this particular participant. She viewed it as being arbitrarily unfair. By attributing the sports media's behavior to an apparent "sexist" perspective shows how nonsensical the rationale of trivializing women's athletics seemed to most of these athletes. There is no "good" reason for unequal coverage.

J: Would you like to see more women's coverage? Yeah? Why?

CC: Because they're sexist pigs, the media's sexist pigs...[laugh] They think that...the men are the best but nobody knows that the women have been like national champions or actually world champions...for is it two years or three years or something...and like nobody knows that, but that's much better than the men have been doing.

J: Yeah, why do you think that it's like that?

CC: Because the men don't want the women to be better than them.

It is absolutely incomprehensible to this girl, as well the majority of the participant group, that so much attention is paid to the U.S. Men's Soccer Team and so little to the U.S.

Women's Soccer Team when it seems obvious that the women's team is the more successful team. Why would the sports media focus solely on the inferior team? Why would they blatantly ignore the *world champions*? It seems so wrong that it must be contrived. Similar comments that the sports media was comprised of "sexist pigs" were not uncommon. These young girls felt that neither sporting experience is inherently more important than the other, and it was therefore viewed as inaccurate, unwarranted, and simply unfair when the sports media seemed to encourage this gender-based hierarchy of sporting experiences.

These girls also made a strong effort on several occasions to make it clear that they didn't mean for the media to eliminate coverage of men's athletics or to cover women's athletics more than men's. They simply felt that the coverage should be absolutely equal, both in terms of the amount and quality.

KK: Well I think they should definitely show interviews with the United States team because right now they are the best in the world.

J: The women's team?

KK: Yes, and show like highlights just like they show for the men's world cup and men's games...even if they had it once a week, just like sports highlights and updates about the news, things in soccer, and great plays and everything like that

J: Uh huh, would you cover men's soccer too?

KK: Yeah, because I think if we just were to cover women then it would...be reverse discrimination. That would just be like what they're doing now.

This idea of fairness was pervasive. There was a common belief among these girls that the sports media had an inherent responsibility to be unbiased in its coverage and to portray only the truth or reality about the sporting

experience. Time and time again these girls expressed the strong opinion that the sports media was not meeting its charge intentionally and had ulterior motives to somehow glorify men's athletics while trivializing women's.

The idea that the sports media had a hidden agenda to preserve the male hegemony of men's athletics was common, perhaps because there seemed to be no other plausible reason for the state of the sports media. The sports media was often viewed as being the way it was, "because the men don't want the women to be better than them." This idea that there was a "sexist" purpose to the sports media's behavior was voiced frequently by these athletes. They also felt that this portrayal of female athletes, and women in general, was simply wrong. These athletes believed that the sports media had an inherent responsibility to portray women as they should be portrayed, as equals. The strength of this conviction stemmed from their belief that women really are the equals of men. The sports media's failure to embrace and reflect this opinion continually frustrated these athletes. It was the inconsistency between what they perceived to be actual reality and what the sports media portrayed as reality that was the focal point of their discontent.

These athletes often viewed the sports media as being unfair and untrue. They felt very justified in characterizing the sports media in this manner, because they truly considered themselves to be "experts" on soccer and on the reality of being a female athlete. They drew upon their experiences as athletes to establish their expertise and to

then confidently judge the sports media. Essentially, they used their perceived expertise as a kind of "media filter." These girls felt they knew what was correct or incorrect within the sports media's portrayal of female athletes because they are female athletes. They are living the experience that the sports media is trying to portray, and therefore feel quite justified in their right to critique the sports media's portrayal of that experience.

Perceptions of the Sports Media's Influence on Others

While these girls were very frustrated at the behavior of the sports media, they were not very concerned that the coverage would negatively affect the actual legitimacy of their athletic endeavors. No matter how the sports media portrayed the sporting experiences of girls and women, these girls felt that the sports media could never actually change how they felt about their own experience. According to these athletes, the sports media did not have the power to change the reality of their sport experience. Despite their own resolve to be "immune" to inaccurate portrayals of their sport experience, these athletes recognized that the sports media can be a substantial influence on people's perceptions and beliefs. The primary concern of these athletes was that the sports media would lead *society to believe*, incorrectly, that the sporting experiences of women and girls were somehow less important. They felt that most people do not have the experience or (perceived) expertise regarding female athletic participation, and therefore do not have the ability to be discriminating viewers. They believe that without the proper

information or experience to filter through the mediated event, the sports media can be very influential. They even credit the general media with influencing their own opinions on subjects other than athletics.

JJ: Yeah well, like...the commercials against the smoking. Like how they show this guy that puts...a picture of his daughter and that's like the warning label on the cigarette box. I like that, and I like the...other non smoking ones, cause there's like a basketball one, like, if you can't...run you can't play and all this stuff...it's like yeah if you smoke you choke, I like that commercial.

J: Do you think that affects your views on smoking?

JJ: Yeah I do, and...I think it's especially the one when he puts the picture of his daughter...a lot.

This girl admits that the media has the power to influence her views on the subject of smoking. Admittedly, this smoking commercial is different than most sports media presentations in that the message within the text is blatant and not simply implied. "Smoking is bad." There is no ambivalence. Often the sports media trivializes women in sport through *implied* messages. The smoking commercial, however, does show just how influential the media can be on a viewer, regardless of how "obvious" the message might be. These girls recognized the influential nature of the media, and it was the perceived impact the sports media has on others concerning sports that really worried these athletes. These girls clearly felt the sports media has the power to impact how other people view their sport and their participation in that sport. Further, they perceived that the sports media was perpetuating a common, yet "inaccurate" belief that women's sporting experiences were inherently

inferior to men's.

J: ...Would you like to see more coverage of women's sports?

DD: Yeah, because then people would know. Guys are always like, oh we can beat you... but if they see good...women, they [would be] like, oh wow, see they can be good...and they'd realize that women are good too, and it's not always men that are the good ones.

The sports media was seen as a potential tool to legitimize the women's sporting experience in the eyes of others. Many of these girls believed that if the sports media would accurately portray their experience, then society would, in turn, begin to embrace their participation as strongly as they do the men's. The concern of these girls is that the sports media is consistently sending the wrong message to society about the value of women's participation in sport, and that society is internalizing this message because they do not have any reason to do otherwise.

This legitimizing power of the sports media was also connected to the perceptions of soccer in general, not just women's soccer.

J: Would you like to see more?

DD: Yeah, cause then people would know, like there's guys at my school and they're football players and like [they think] soccer's a wussy sport and I'm like no, there's pushing in soccer, and then one of my friends called me to say, 'I watched a World Cup game and I saw all the pushing', and I'm like yeah, see I told you there's pushing, and like yeah, then people will realize that it's not like a little wussy [sport] where you just run around cause that's what they think it is.

J: How do you think that watching that World Cup game affected that guy?

DD: Well he saw that...it's tough. I mean for one thing there's a lot of running and he could never do that...and and he just saw that... it's rough like football.

These girls are acutely aware of the power the sports media has to define what is valuable and legitimate in sport. This girl attributes her male friend's new appreciation of soccer to the sports media's portrayal of the sport in a very serious and acceptable manner. She also recognizes that society values sport characteristics such as aggressiveness and toughness, and that the sports media has the ability to show that soccer possesses these legitimizing traits. It is obvious that these girls recognize that the traditional male-model of athletic prowess is the standard by which society still judges the worth of any athletic endeavor. Although it is obvious that these girls value their sport participation highly, it is unclear if these girls judge their own athletic experience using the male-referenced criteria employed by society. Their beliefs of what made a sport valuable seemed to be unclear. They were often ambivalent or sometimes even unconcerned about the idea that the perceived quality of all athletics is based on a male-model.

These girls also acknowledged that the majority of people, at this point in time, prefer to watch men's athletics and attribute that preference to the prevalence of sports fitting the criteria of the male-model of athletics.

J: Why do you think...the showing of men's comes first?

DD: I don't know. Like sometimes it's more exciting...Like [in] basketball they do much more exciting things. They're always dunking it. They're physically do[ing] more exciting things. They're like allowed to, it seems like. They can jump higher or go faster...so I think people are more tuned into the exciting things rather than like if you don't know...the game.

This girl understands that the sports media may be showing primarily men's athletics because the audience simply finds the "exciting" displays of physical prowess more entertaining. She also suggests that the general audience is more attracted to these exciting elements of the men's game because they don't have enough knowledge about the sport of basketball to be attracted to the finer points of the game. As she said, "if you don't know the game," then you would be, "more tuned into the exciting things." There is, once again, the suggestion that a level of expertise is required to see beyond the mediated experience into the "real" picture. The perception of these athletes is that society simply doesn't know any better. A combination of the influence of the male hegemony and the lack of adequate information has led society to value these displays of physical superiority over anything remotely more sophisticated. The majority of these girls also recognize, however, that by subscribing to this perceived audience preference, the sports media perpetuates the societal attitude that women's athletics are second to men's and reinforces the value of the male-model of athletics.

It was clear these athletes believed that when an audience does not have enough experience in an area to achieve a level of expertise, then the media can be a very effective tool in relaying an opinion about that subject. The problem, however, occurs when the media introduces misinformation, or even propaganda, into this vacuum. Since there is nothing to dispute the incorrect message that the

media is sending, more often than not, it is assimilated into the popular culture. This is a frightening prospect to these girls because they understand the power the media can have over the uninformed, and clearly they believe that society is uninformed about the experience of female athletes.

The Impact of the Sports Media on the Participants' Self-Perceptions

Although these athletes perceived the sports media as a threat to society's ability to accept women's sport experiences as valuable, there is little, if any, perception of threat towards their own perceptions of their experience. The ability of these girls to examine a visual or written portrayal of sport, understand it, and then critique it, establishes these girls as more than just a passive group of sports media consumers. Over and over they demonstrated the ability to consciously accept or reject either part or all of the message presented within the sports media when it pertained to the perceived importance of women in sport and soccer in general. In the following example, one girl describes the impact of the sports media on society's perceptions of soccer while minimalizing the impact on her own perceptions.

DD: Not really, umm, it just makes me feel like soccer's not as important in the United States [than] like all over the world. [The world] just seems like obsessed with it, and in the United States it's not...as important as some of the other sports. It doesn't make me feel bad, I could care less if they don't like it... [laugh]...just so long as I like it and that's about it.

This girl suggests that the message often produced by the

American sports media, that soccer is not important, has a different influence on different audiences. She knows about soccer's international popularity and is therefore able to put the American sports media's portrayal in perspective. The rest of the country, she admits, may not be able to do the same. These girls considered their perceived expertise on the subjects of soccer and female participation in athletics as a legitimate basis for such critical interpretations of the sports media.

Although these girls believe that they will value their athletic experience regardless of what the sports media says, they still recognize the power of the sports media to influence an uneducated audience. They recognize that other people may not be capable of disregarding the same message because they simply do not know what the reality of female participation in athletics actually is. Others may not have the knowledge base, or expertise, to filter through what they see.

Perceived Positive Uses of Sports Media For Self

While adamantly rejecting the ideas within the sports media that they disagree with, these girls also identified many current and potential positive uses of the sports media. They believe they have the ability to pick and choose what they consider to be legitimate and useful. This group of athletes understands what it means to be discriminating viewers and believe that they are such viewers. The message professed by the sports media is *not* univocal and deterministic to these young athletes. Because they are able

to view the sports media with an "expert's eye", they feel they are able to filter out the incorrect information and use what they consider to be useful and important. These girls confidently rejected the message that their sport experience was inferior to any male's. At the same time, they easily embraced the perceived benefits of the sports media without much hesitation. They seemed to easily filter the text, reject that which was not attractive to their own beliefs or needs, and absorb that which was.

Although these girls did not have regular exposure to women playing their sport, they were able to cite several aspects that they did find useful about the sports media's portrayal of soccer. They were very interested in displays of competence by great players because they felt it was an opportunity to learn something they could incorporate into their own play. Exhibitions of great "moves" and terrific goals were discussed and studied with much enthusiasm. "I try to picture myself doing it...I try to practice it..." as one girl put it. These were real students of the game who were trying to enhance their own abilities by looking for and absorbing different technical and tactical strategies. They recognized the sports media as a terrific source of information in this respect, even if they were relegated to watching or reading about only men's soccer. These girls were able to filter through the inherent message that men's soccer is the apparent standard, and use the subject matter of these broadcasts to enhance their own performance.

These experiences of accepting mediated displays of

talent of mostly male players apparently has some positive influence on these athletes' perception of their own abilities and talent. "...one thing I like is some of the moves we've learned, I like to see them in action in the World Cup. It's like, oh wow! I can do that!" By seeing someone who is recognized as a "great player" actually use the very same move that she has learned, she is able to associate herself with a small part of that player's greatness. She is doing great moves too, or rather moves that have been proven to be valuable and important.

The justification of their performances by soccer superstars was cited often by these girls as a motivating factor in continuing their own participation and improving their own performance.

"...it kind of helps me mentally again because it's like it kind of pushes me more because it's like if they can, I can work just as hard as them to achieve one of my goals..."

A strong sense of achievement was identified when their own performance paralleled that of a world-class player, and this achievement propelled them to continue striving to be the best player they could be. Admittedly, these particular girls were "soccer junkies" who had already been identified as talented players, and were therefore perhaps much quicker to be motivated to train and play. However, it became clear through these interviews that the sports media was at times viewed as a motivating influence.

These players also identified an interesting distinction within the different types of sports media. Visual mediums such as matches, interviews, and commercials seen on T.V. or

action shots in magazines proved to be much more enthusiastically embraced by these girls as being valuable. The credibility awarded towards visual images far exceeded that attributed to written forms of the sports media such as articles or books. In fact, very few of these athletes expressed an interest in reading at all. Most said they might read more if presented with more soccer-related material, but there was an overwhelming preference for viewing the athletes in action.

FF: Yeah..cause...sometimes stuff you read is not true, or maybe it is... you can have different opinions to what's written...and it doesn't influence me a lot...definitely seeing specially on TV...Well I mean like in commercials and stuff...No, seriously anybody can run and freeze frame a photograph. I mean...you think about it, you could do that easily and um you know watching...I think influences me more than reading, cause I can disagree with reading more...Maybe cause, like, I write stuff in school and you write editorials maybe on something so you know that it's just somebody's ideas whereas if you're seeing something it's happening...even though...it might not be real because of camera or something...it seems like it's happening....

Although this girl recognized that the television industry manipulated what she sees, "...it might not be real because of camera or something," she still believed that watching something in action on T.V. still makes it, "seem like it's happening...", and was therefore much more credible. This girl admitted she was aware of the media's ability to manipulate the content, thereby indicating her sophistication as a viewer, but also professed that if she was given the opportunity to view the action, then she believed she had the ability to filter through most of the mediation and find what is real. Words are tricky, but action images are real.

These girls believed visual mediums such as T.V. were much more credible, thus they were perceived as more influential. Apparently, seeing is believing.

Role-models that seemed more real and accessible were also thought to be more influential. These players felt they could learn from and be motivated by the players on TV because they were seen as being more real than players described in a newspaper article. These athletes felt there was less mediation by the television and photographs and it was therefore easier to see beyond the mediation and focus on only what was "real". Although they believed they could learn from and be motivated by watching the men's game, many of these girls voiced the opinion that the effects would be enhanced if given the opportunity to view women in the same respect. This would make the viewing experience even "more real" and therefore more influential. "If you see a man doing it you're like wow, I don't know if I can do [it] but in women you know...they can do it so you [can] probably do it sometime." A "similar other" as a role model increases the belief that similar goals are achievable.

It was also obvious that, all things being equal, these girls would have preferred to watch women playing their sport when the purpose was to enhance their own performance and not just for entertainment's sake.

LL:like the Tab Ramos commercial where he's doing all that stuff. If a woman was doing it, you'd be like oh, I want to do it too, you know, and I can be like that. I want my body like my muscles built like hers and stuff, I mean that's what you're thinking. You're like 'wow' when you see him doing all that stuff, just if you're seeing a girl doing all

that stuff it'd be awesome too.

J: So you think your response is maybe a little different maybe depending on

LL: Yeah cause...I'm not gonna get a body like Tab Ramos' [laugh]

J: Umm so if you saw maybe a woman doing exactly the same thing...You would react a little bit differently?

LL: Yeah I think so. I think it it'd be amazing just to see that a woman do something, there's not anything, I haven't seen like a commercial with like one woman soccer player.

The physical differences between this girl and the male player Tab Ramos were a clear deterrent to this girl embracing Ramos as a role model for her own performance. "I'm not gonna get a body like Tab Ramos'." She obviously appreciated the display of talent by this U.S. National Team member, and may have even been motivated to some extent to continue participating in soccer, but clearly the impact would have been much greater to this particular athlete if the star had been of the same gender.

These athletes repeatedly expressed how much they enjoyed watching soccer on TV, whatever the gender of the participants, and recognized the motivating ability these mediated events had for them. There was little debate, however, over whether or not they would support the addition of more coverage of women playing soccer. They would support it, enthusiastically, but their support was always given with the caveat that coverage of men's soccer should not be limited as a result. The sports media coverage should be consistent across genders. They did not attribute value to either type of coverage exclusively, but rather found worthy characteristics in each.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the sports media and these particular female athletes. Through these interviews, it became apparent that the relationship is perhaps more complex and interpretive than previously assumed by other sports media researchers. These girls demonstrated that they were acutely aware of both the state of the sports media and the potential power of the sports media on others and themselves.

The trivialization of women's sport experience, and soccer in general, was an obvious characteristic of the sports media to this group of girls. The reaction to this state of the sports media was, however, more poignant than anticipated. These athletes spoke with unfailing conviction that this portrayal of women was unfair and simply untrue. Apparently, these athletes relied much more heavily on their perceived expertise as female athletes rather than the sports media's portrayal of female athletes to provide a framework to judge their experiences.

These athletes, however, also recognized that not everyone is fortunate enough to have this additional experience or knowledge to use as a filter for viewing sports events. This fact, combined with their perception of the sports media as a potential influence on the uninformed, led them to believe that the sports media is successfully perpetuating the trivialization of women's sport experience within our society. This seems to be a significant source of concern for many of these young athletes.

Despite this concern, these girls were able to use many mediated sports events as sources of information to improve their own playing performances and self-perceptions of ability, which in turn proved to be a source of motivation. Several indicated, however, that viewing women's soccer, as opposed to men's, would enhance the motivational effect. This was attributed to the idea that similar models tend to be more indicative of one's own potential.

All in all, these athletes viewed their relationship with the sports media as one that was dictated by them and not by the sports media. They considered themselves to be above the influence the sports media when it came to perceptions of their own sporting experience. This perception of control stemmed from their perception of themselves as "experts" and therefore discriminating viewers. Uneducated viewers, however, were perceived as not being able to filter through the sports media's incorrect portrayal of women in sports.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

This investigation sought to further understand the relationship between young female athletes and the sports media. It has been extensively documented that the content of the sports media regularly minimizes the performance and experience of female athletes (Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1993; Oglesby, 1978; Duncan, 1993; Messner, 1988). There has been, however, very little sports media research focusing directly on *defining* the relationship between the sports media and female athletes. Does the message provided by the sports media that female athletes are of secondary importance, have any significant effect on it's female audience? This question has not been adequately addressed.

In 1993, Duncan and Brummett identified two common assumptions drawn by previous sports media investigators that attempted to address this issue. First, "sport media texts whose ideologies are sexist must necessarily disempower women and girls" (p. 58). This suggests that the relationship between the sports media and the audience is one of unidirectional influence. The structure of this assumed relationship is that an intended message is sent and it is then unequivocally internalized by the audience. There is no conscious process of reflecting on, and accepting or rejecting the intended message, but rather it is simply accepted without any sort of deliberation. The second

assumption is that the audience can only interpret one meaning from the text of sports media portrayals. In other words, sports media is univocal and thus, every one in the audience internalizes the same meaning from the message. There is no allowance for different interpretations of the sports media's message by different members of the audience. If a text reflects sexist attitudes, then everyone sees the same portrayal of sexism and there is no way for a viewer to choose or discriminate between meanings. These assumptions, however logical they may seem, have not been grounded in solid research. They are only assumptions. The intent of the current study was to test the validity of these assumptions, thereby better defining the relationship between the sports media and the female audience.

The Use of Perceived Expertise as a "Media Filter"

This study identified that the relationship between the sports media and the audience may not be what sports media researchers previously assumed it was. One of the most consistent findings from these interviews is that the ability to be a discriminating viewer is derived from one's perceived level of expertise in the mediated subject. This idea, that the influence of the media can be superseded by previous knowledge or experience, is in stark contrast to the previous assumptions made about the influence of the sports media (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1983; Theberge, 1991; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Apparently the message within the text is *not* always univocal or absolute, but rather contingent upon the viewer's knowledge of that subject. These participants, for

example, believed in their own knowledge in the areas of soccer and female participation in sport. Therefore, they felt they were able to critique the sports media's portrayal of these two subjects. Since this perceived ability to filter through the sports media's "spin" depended on each individual's own experience, the message was presumably at least slightly different for each individual. No two people have the exact same collection of memories, facts, or experiences, and so, no two people can possibly view everything from the same perspective. One person may fully embrace the whole intended message, while another may interpret the same text and find a different meaning that "fits" their own experience.

These athletes demonstrated the ability to literally pick and choose from the sports media what they wanted to embrace as valuable and what they wanted to reject as false or irrelevant to their needs. This ability, however, was only apparent when the subject matter of the text was within the subject area of the participants' perceived expertise. They truly had a critic's eye when there was anything on television that concerned soccer or women in sport. In fact, these two subject areas were viewed with the highest level of scrutiny and interest.

The athletes in the present study consistently stated that any false representations or negative implications within the sports media would not affect their own perceptions of their sport experience. Again, this is in contrast to the initial predictions of most previous sports

media researchers (Theberge, 1991; Theberge & Cronk, 1986) that the negative portrayals of female athletes would be universally internalized by female athletes. However, it cannot be assumed that all female athletes of the same age would demonstrate the same level of resistance. These girls have already been told they are better than the average soccer player. Their selection to ODP has, in effect, certified their soccer knowledge and ability, and they also have a certain level of prestige to lose if their experience is deemed inferior. These girls might possibly have a greater need to defend their participation because they have much more personally invested in it.

Although the use of perceived expertise to filter the sports media is not supported by most of the previous sports-media research, Bruce's (1993) study also identified perceived expertise as a critical piece in the relationship between the audience and the media in her discussion of audience "resistance through knowledge" (p. 93). Bruce (1993) suggests that the women in her study were able to resist the idea that women's basketball was less important partly by becoming "experts" on women's basketball. This expertise then allowed them to identify women's basketball as being more valuable and important than the sports media's text suggests. Instead of using their expertise to "pick and choose" from the sports media, Bruce (1993) suggests perceived expertise is used by these women to increase the perceived value of women's basketball and "resist" the dominant message. This use of expertise is slightly

different than how the girls in the present study use perceived expertise to filter, accept/reject, and critique all forms of sports media. However, the ideas that meaning is not inherent within the text and that perceived expertise influences audience interpretation are very similar.

These findings also strongly parallel Harter's (1978, 1990) previous self-perception research. These athletes are using self-referenced criteria as sources of information. Their past experience qualifies them as "experts". Harter (1978, 1990) and Bandura (1986) both identified self-referenced criteria as being *more* influential on self-perceptions than vicarious experiences or significant others. This is a possible explanation for these athletes' stronger belief in their perceived expertise and experience rather than the sports media. Harter (1978, 1990) suggested that successful mastery attempts would have stronger influence over self-perceptions than interactions with society. The use of perceived expertise by these girls, therefore, fits within Harter and Bandura's hierarchy of factors influencing self-perceptions. Successful mastery attempts are primary factors, significant others are secondary. This is an interesting break from the previous sports-media research. However, for individuals who do not have this high level of ability and experience, vicarious sources of competence information would be predicted to have a greater impact.

The use of previous knowledge or expertise is also identified by Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding communication model. Hall suggests that the message receiver uses, to some

extent, their previous knowledge and experience to interpret the received message. This model reinforces the idea that the media is not univocal and can be interpreted differently by people from different backgrounds.

Acquisition of Perceived Expertise

These fourteen year old girls identified expertise as the determining variable in interpreting the sports media's message. This casts doubt on the assumption that the ability to filter comes purely with age. Obviously the older one is, the more experience one has. An adult, therefore may have the ability to filter through a much larger array of mediated subjects than a child. However, the ability to be an "expert" in something is not determined by one's age. These adolescent girls possess more expertise on soccer than perhaps the average forty year-old American. Expertise is due to experience and accumulated knowledge, not age.

"Filtering" as a Conscious Process

When these athletes used their perceived expertise to critically examine the "preferred" reading of the text, they did so with the awareness that they were, in fact, actively rejecting the text. The process of being exposed to the sports media, evaluating the intended meaning, and choosing to reject or accept that meaning was truly a conscious process. It was not something done subconsciously or passively.

However, when the media covered a topic that was not within the participant's area of perceived expertise, the response these athletes had was much more resigned. In some

cases, they even seemed to be unaware that they were internalizing the media's intended message. When one girl discussed the impact the anti-smoking commercial had on her, there was no indication that she was consciously resigning her self to be influenced, but rather it seemed to be the natural course of action. Admittedly, this smoking commercial is different than most sports media presentations in that the message within the text is provided by recognized experts and is blatant. It is not implied. Often the sports media trivializes women in sport through implied messages.

The smoking commercial, however, does show just how influential the media can be on a viewer, regardless of how "obvious" the message might be. This girl did not smoke, nor had she spent years researching nicotine withdrawal. She was not an expert on the subject of smoking, and therefore was unable to use expertise as a reference point to filter the media's portrayal. Because of her lack of expertise, she did not have the same kind of ability to filter this smoking commercial in the same way she would be able to filter a televised soccer match. Instead of going through the conscious process of questioning the validity of the "preferred" message, this girl felt an immediate connection with the intended message. Her lack of expertise, not only inhibited her ability to "pick and choose", but it also led her to become a more passive viewer. She was not interacting with the media. She was reacting. However, even though she did not perhaps consciously choose to be influenced, she was aware that the commercial strongly influenced her opinion

about smoking. Her lack of expertise did not completely pacify her. She consciously acknowledged that the commercial had strongly influenced her opinion of smoking. These girls usually seemed to be keenly aware of the potential effects the media can have on anyone's opinions. This awareness was always present regardless of their perceived level of expertise.

This awareness of the media's potential to influence an audience's opinion is corroborated by several researchers' (Wenner, 1989; McCombs et al., 1991). They concluded that the media can influence the salience an audience attributes to a particular issue. Where this study's findings deviate from these previous conclusions is that it suggests that this ability of the media to influence the salience of an issue can be *superseded* by the viewer's previous knowledge or experience. This is a shift of control from the media to the audience. This shift of control was also reflected in the degree of impact the sports media had on the self-perceptions of these athletes.

Self-Perceptions and the Sports Media

Perceived Expertise as the Primary Influence

These girls were talented soccer players with a history of successful outcomes. They perceived themselves as very competent in playing their sport. They therefore viewed themselves as experts about their sport and their participation. These perceptions of competence and expertise were used to supersede the influence of the sports media. These girls filtered out most of the negative impact the

sports media might have on their self-perceptions. This, again, clearly reflects Harter's (1978) model of competence motivation. Socializing interactions are secondary to previous experiences at mastery attempts.

Sports Media as a "Significant Other"

The strength of their belief in their ability to judge the sports media suggests that the confidence these girls have in their expertise, or "filter", is very high. In fact, it is seemingly high enough to supersede the influence of the sports media. Despite the trivializing manner in which the media portrays female athletes, almost every single one of these girls made it clear that they *like* being known as real athletes. They also made it clear that a "real" athlete was not necessarily defined by television. This suggests that there are other factors that influence the self-perception of these athletes much more strongly than the media.

If the media is not overtly molding the self-perceptions of these athletes, then one can assume that different significant others are reinforcing and shaping their self-perceptions. If the media does not embrace women's athletics, then there must be a different support system present within society that encourages these athletes to participate and to feel good about their participation. Previous research strongly supports the idea that "significant others" play a critical role in the athlete's perception of competence and self-worth (Ebbeck & Stuart, 1993; Harter, 1978 & 1990; Weiss, 1987). This study suggests that the media may be a "secondary" significant other. These

girls demonstrated that the effects of the media can be superseded. Other primary significant others including parents, coaches, and peers may also support and reinforce positive self-perceptions of ability.

This study extends the findings of Duncan & Brummett's (1993) study of women viewing football and Bruce's (1993) study of women viewing women's basketball. Like some of the women in Duncan and Brummett's (1993) study and Bruce's (1993) study, these soccer players demonstrated their ability to reject parts or all of the text by displaying knowledge or expertise about soccer and women in sports. Perhaps they also achieved a sense of empowerment through their filtering process. This suggests that the media could be a possible means of positively affecting a viewer's perception of self-worth. It was certainly cited as a possible source of motivation by these athletes.

Participants Perceptions of the Sports Media

By actively using their perceived expertise as a sports media filter, these athletes became very critical and interactive viewers. In fact, the intensity of their responses to "inaccurate" portrayals of soccer or female athletes was sometimes astounding. In 1991, Gantz and Wenner suggested that as female participation becomes more acceptable, females may begin to respond more strongly to sports media. They did not predict, however, that the strength of response would be dependent upon a more discriminating viewing behavior. Instead, they believed that the strength of response would be related to the emotional

involvement of female viewers with the mediated sport experience. Although the response of these particular girls was relatively emotional, it was not simply because they felt a stronger "connection" with the media. Instead, it was because they were interpreting the media. The emotional response of these girls stemmed from the passion they felt about their own sporting experiences and the belief that the media was not recognizing that passion as legitimate. Gantz and Wenner (1991) did not suggest that the relationship between the sports media and females would become so complex.

The participants in this study did respond very strongly to the sports media. They had become both very interested in the sports media, and yet very critical. The strength of their response was reflected in their level of critique and interest. Every time these individuals were exposed to the sports media they carefully judged it, instead of immediately internalizing or rejecting the intended message. Actually, the strength of their opinions concerning the recurring sexism present in the text was rather surprising. When an idea was presented such as, "girls who play sports are the exception...most girls do not play," these participants were quick to call such statements as "stupid", "sexist", or at the least "untrue". In fact, there was little, if any, hesitation by these girls to identify and negate representations they felt were false.

The participants were also quick, however, to embrace representations in the media they felt were "useful", such as parts of televised men's World Cup soccer matches. These

athletes enjoyed watching the displays of skill, and often expressed an increase in their own motivation to continue playing. At the same time, however, they recognized that when the media only shows men's soccer, it is implying that women's soccer is not as important. This separate but embedded message, within the *same* televised event, was rejected outright. These athletes felt confident in their ability to pick and choose what was real and relevant within the text.

Media's Impact on Societal Perceptions

Although these girls were confident in their own ability to judge the sports media, they were not as optimistic about society's ability to filter the same media representations. These girls recognized that many people in society do not have the expertise to filter through the sports media's presentation of women's sporting experiences that created the strongest concern amongst this group of girls. They believed that the sports media was perpetuating inaccurate beliefs about women's sports. Many of these participants suggested that the sports media could be used as tool to "correct" society's beliefs by simply portraying women's sports in an "accurate" manner. This opinion coincides with previous sports media researchers' call for more "legitimate" portrayals of female athletes (Theberge, 1991; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). The belief that the media has the potential to completely alter societal opinion may attribute too much power to the media. However, this belief in the power of the sports media cannot be ignored. This belief reinforces the

fact that these girls really do perceive expertise as the determining factor in the level of influence the media can have over an audience. Society does not understand what the reality of women in sport is, and so, according to these girls, society does not have the ability to filter the sports media's intended message. These girls recognized society's inability to filter as an opportunity to "correct" society's opinion of women in sport. Currently, society was internalizing "incorrect" information because it did not have the expertise to recognize these portrayals as untrue. If "good" information was substituted for the the "bad" information, then society would internalize the new, correct, message instead and change its opinion of female athletes. The possibility of using the media as a tool to influence societal opinion excited these athletes.

Perception of Equality Within Sport

Wenner (1989) suggests, "The covert gender valuation in the mediated sport marketplace may be one of the strongholds of traditional sexism in a society where such values are losing utility as social roles can less often be equated with gender" (p. 43). These girls are growing up in a society where it is acceptable, and even encouraged, for women to enter professions traditionally reserved for men, such as law, medicine, and politics. It is also becoming more and more "normal" for women to be athletes. The societal idea that women should be able to do anything men do, combined with the "sameness" found within American soccer culture has apparently produced a group of young girls very confident in

the idea that anything less than equality is just wrong.

Watson (1993) argued that society defines excellence by physical superiority and that this definition of excellence inherently discriminates against women. He also pointed out, however, that if a particular sport emphasized physical traits typically superior in females, then a woman could achieve excellence within this male model of excellence. Soccer, because of its nature, does not define excellence in terms of stronger, faster, and bigger. This may explain why these girls felt so strongly that their soccer experience was equally important to any male's soccer experience and that the media was remiss in its failure to pay equal attention to male and female soccer players. It may also explain why they were able to extract "useful" and motivating interpretations from media presentations of men's soccer as well as women's soccer.

Despite the apparent progress towards equality within sport, excellence is still generally based on a male-model, women's sporting events are perceived as secondary by the media, and the perception of sport as a male-domain is still dominant. So, "how is it that members [women] are capable of participating at all in sport?" (Duncan & Brummett, 1993, p. 58). Perhaps we need to further identify how the support systems of female athletes are constructed, rather than deconstruct the female audience's reaction to media. For this group of athletes, the media plays only a secondary role in their development of self-worth and motivation to participate.

The media is apparently not an integral part of these athletes' support system. This would eliminate it as a significant influence on these athletes' perceptions of self-worth. Society, in a general sense, has also been identified as being unsupportive of female athletes, both by these participants and by previous research (Ireland, 1993; Kane, 1987; Messner 1988). It would appear, then, that the support system of these young female athletes is comprised primarily of "close" significant others. These may include their peers, coaches, and parents. These people probably have a greater impact on these athletes' self-worth than the media.

Future Directions

This was a very unique subject group and so it should not be assumed that the findings can be generalized to other populations. This was a very competent group of athletes associated with a sport that values the participation of both genders equally. The level of confidence and self-worth within this particular population is already quite high. This may mean they are more resilient to the influence of the sports media than the average viewer. It would be interesting to see if more typical populations of female athletes also demonstrate the same resistance to the trivializing message within the sports media.

This is a very dynamic time for both the sports media and the female athlete. The sports media has slowly begun to embrace the female athlete as a marketable subject as more women participate in athletics. This study provided a "snapshot" of this continuing relationship. As the sports

media evolves, will its relationship with the female athlete also continue to evolve? When this study was conducted, the amount of sports media coverage of male athletes far exceeded the amount of coverage of female athletes. However, there were signs of change, and it was obvious that these girls were eager to embrace any supportive portrayal of their experience. As the media becomes female-athlete friendly, will the female audience lose its ability to filter? Will they lose their critical eye? And if this happens, will the sports media then be able to shape what the female sport experience actually means?

The state of the sports media is not constant. This is a critical time in the development of this institution. Some coverage is still highlighting the feminine aspect of women in sport far more than the idea that these are legitimate competitors. However, there continues to be more and more coverage that presents female athletes as serious, competent, and legitimate. Because no one is sure where the sports media is headed exactly, content analyses should continue to track this evolution. At the same time, further investigations should also examine the responses of female athletes to the sports media. The relationship between the audience and the sports media cannot be understood fully if the information about either element is dated.

Summary

This study did not find anything to support either of the assumptions identified by Duncan & Brummett (1993). These girls were not disempowered by sexist sports media

presentations. Instead, they were able to identify multiple readings of the text, and they believed some readings were more legitimate than others. They believed the influence of the sports media could be superseded by using their perceived expertise as a "media filter". This group of young, talented athletes were able to find some positive uses of the sports media because they could "pick and choose" what they decided to embrace from the text and what they decided to reject.

APPENDIX A
PROPOSED INTERVIEW GUIDE

PROPOSED INTERVIEW GUIDE

HISTORY

1. When did you start playing soccer?
2. How often do you play? Have you always played that often?
3. Why did you start? Were there any people that influenced you?
4. Why are you still playing? What kept you in it?
5. Are there any people around you that help keep you in the game?

SELF PERCEPTIONS

1. How would you describe yourself as an athlete? What adjectives would you use?
2. When are you successful in athletics?
3. When are you not successful?
4. If you could add anything to yourself to make you a better athlete, what would it be?
5. Do you like to be known as an athlete? Why?

MODELS

1. Is there any player or person you look up to in sport?
2. How long have you known (about) this person?
3. Do you think role models are important? Why?
4. Do you see yourself as a model?

MEDIA

1. What types of things do you like to read or watch on T.V.?
2. How often do you read or watch T.V.?
3. Is reading or watching T.V. important to you?
4. Do you like to read about or watch soccer on T.V.?
5. What is it about soccer that you like to read or watch?

- Games, great players, goals, tactics?
6. How much do you read about or watch soccer on T.V.?
 7. If you could create the best magazine, book, or T.V. show about soccer what would it be like?
 8. Do you think books, magazines, or T.V. have influenced how you play or feel about soccer, and how do you think that's happened?

APPENDIX B
COVER LETTER

May 17, 1994

1 Richards Ave
Apt. C
Portsmouth, NH 03801

Dear Parent,

Currently, I am working towards my Master's degree at the University of New Hampshire. For my thesis, I am conducting a study exploring the influence of the sports media on young female athlete's self-perceptions in sport. I hope you will consider allowing your daughter to participate. However, participation is completely voluntary and will not affect your child's standing on this team. Participation will consist of an interview that will last approximately one hour. The date and time of the interview will be arranged at your convenience. Please read the enclosed consent form carefully. If you consent to allow your daughter to participate, please sign and return the enclosed consent form to practice with your daughter.

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to call me at 603-431-3172. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Julie Leonhardt
University of New Hampshire

APPENDIX C
PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to understand the relationship between 14 year-old female athletes' self-perceptions and the sports media.

Description: Participation in this study involves an interview with the researcher, where you will be asked to answer several questions in a conversation-like setting. These questions will be open-ended and you will be allowed relay as much information as you desire. The interview should last approximately an hour.

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS AND SIGN BELOW IF YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE.

1. I understand that the use of human subjects in this project has been approved by the UNH Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research.
2. I understand the purpose of this study and what I will be asked to do to participate in this study.
3. I understand that the interview will be taped and transcribed verbatim.
4. I understand that my name and all my answers will be confidential.
5. I understand that my consent to participate in this study is completely voluntary, and that my refusal to participate will not result in a penalty.
6. I agree that I was not made to feel like I had to participate in this study
7. I understand that if I have any questions about this project, that I can call Julie Leonhardt and discuss them privately.
8. I understand that I am not going to be paid for my participation.
9. I understand that I may see the results of this project if I ask to see them.

Please indicate if you want or don't to participate in this study.

I, _____ agree to participate in this study.
(print your name)

I, _____ do not agree to participate in this study.
(print your name)

Please sign your name and write in the date.

(your signature)

(date)

APPENDIX D
PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to understand the relationship between 14 year-old female athletes' self-perceptions and the sports media.

Description: Participation of your child in this study involves an interview with the researcher, where your child will be asked to answer several questions in a conversation-like setting. These questions will be open-ended and your child will be allowed relay as much information as she desires. The interview should last approximately an hour.

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS AND SIGN BELOW IF YOU AGREE TO ALLOW PARTICIPATION.

1. I understand that the use of human subjects in this project has been approved by the UNH Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research.
2. I understand the purpose of this study and what my child will be asked to do to participate in this study.
3. I understand that the interview will be taped and transcribed verbatim.
4. I understand that my child's name and all her answers will be confidential.
5. I understand that my consent to allow my child's participation in this study is completely voluntary, and that my refusal to allow her participation will not result in a penalty.
6. I agree that I was not made to feel like my child *had* to participate in this.
7. I understand that if my child has any questions about this project, that she can call Julie Leonhardt and discuss them privately
8. I understand that my child is not going to be paid for her participation.
9. I understand that my child may see the results of this project if she asks to see them.

Please indicate if you want or don't want your child to participate in this study.

I, _____ agree to allow my child's participation in this study.
(print your name)

I, _____ do not agree to allow my child's participation in this study.
(print your name)

Please sign your name and write in the date.

(your signature)

(date)

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