

Essay 2: Women Athletes and Photojournalism

Women athletes are treated differently than men athletes in a number of ways, including differences in the level and quality of media coverage. When women athletes are photographed for a news or sports article, they seem to be framed through the lens of “woman” rather than “athlete.” Instead of the focus being on their athletic prowess, they are portrayed in the way the media portrays women in general, with a tendency to sexualize women's bodies. In the March 24, 2008 issue of ESPN magazine, the contrast between how men and women athletes are styled and photographed is seen clearly in the contrast between the consecutive pictures of Venus Williams, a tennis player, and Tim Duncan, a basketball player.

The March 24, 2008 issue of ESPN was the magazine's tenth anniversary issue, so there were ten versions of the cover featuring eleven athletes. Of these eleven athletes, the only two women featured were Serena and Venus Williams, who shared a cover. The underrepresentation of women athletes on the cover of the magazine is just one piece in the larger picture of women athletes' underrepresentation in sports coverage. But mere underrepresentation is not the only way women athletes are shortchanged in the media. When women *are* represented in sports coverage, there is a bias in the way they are represented.

In “Favoritism and Identity in the Mediation of Sports,” Susan Tyler Eastman describes the various ways in which women athletes are photographed differently than male athletes: “Photographers pay extraordinary amounts of visual attention to the hair, clothing, and makeup of women athletes, but much less so to men, and editors choose to publish (or producers air) such visuals. . . .Indeed, women athletes are often posed in ways that resemble soft-core

pornography.” These criticisms, and others Eastman makes, can be applied to the way Venus Williams was photographed for ESPN magazine.

Inside the magazine, each of the athletes from the ten different versions of the cover was photographed “where they get their spark.” Venus's picture has her posed in a rhinestone-encrusted bikini, lounging in a pool---a photograph which would not look out of place in a men's magazine. In fact, if it were not for Venus's muscular body, the viewer might guess that she was a young socialite rather than a star tennis player. The little dog licking her face and the glitter of her ring and outfit bring to mind Paris Hilton or Nicole Richie.

The setting and props in the photograph are not the only way that Venus's picture differs from corresponding pictures of men athletes; the angle of the shot and the way her body is posed are also important to examine. Eastman mentions how “shots looking down tend to diminish a subject,” while shooting up “creates a sense of dominance, size and power.” The photograph of Venus is shot from above, resulting in a sense of the viewer looking down on her. Venus's body is also posed in a completely non-threatening way. One leg is crossed over the other, her head is tilted to one side, and she's wearing a huge smile. Eastman wrote, “women may safely be criticized for 'not smiling,' an accusation never made of 'serious and concentrated' men athletes.” The “serious and concentrated” ideal for men athletes is readily visible in many of the other pictures in this series, where the men are posed staring off into space with neutral faces. Both Venus and Serena, however, sport big grins, which further serves to make them appear non-threatening.

Because sports are seen as a traditionally masculine activity, a woman athlete is, by the very nature of being a woman and participating in sports, stepping out of society's narrowly prescribed gender role for her. By recasting the athlete as feminine and making her a sexual

object, the threat of gender nonconformity is avoided. Venus Williams's bikini and Serena Williams's chandelier earrings, pink dress, and high heels in the photograph on the opposite page definitely emphasize their femininity and serve to make them appear less threatening.

In contrast to the picture of Venus Williams, the picture of Tim Duncan is not meant to emphasize the sex appeal of his body at all. He is posed playing Halo 3 in a hotel room, wearing baggy athletic wear. Where Venus's photograph has hair and makeup credits in tiny print on the side, Tim Duncan's picture has none. The pictures of the other men athletes are all more similar to the picture of Tim Duncan than they are to the pictures of the Williams sisters. Shot with dark backgrounds in shades of grey and blue, these photographs are a sharp contrast to the sunny, brightly lit Venus picture. The focus is not really on these men's bodies as is blatantly the case in Venus Williams's picture. In the portrait of Dale Earnhart, Jr, the viewer cannot even see his body, just his head through the window of a car.

Because of societal sexism, women athletes already face the problem of not being taken seriously as athletes. Women's sports are seen as not as competitive or tough as men's sports. For women athletes to be photographed in sexualizing, demeaning ways only adds to the problem of not being taken seriously as athletes. In a world of gender equality, women athletes (and all women portrayed in the media) would be photographed in the same way that men are: as people rather than sexual objects.