

# Depicting the Sporting Body: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Disability in Women's Sport/Fitness Magazines

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## **Abstract**

This research examines the relationship between images of sport, disability, gender and race in four U.S. women's sport/fitness magazines. According to a view of feminism that sees it as addressing all oppressions, these magazines should provide an empowering space for all women, including women with a disability. Rejection of ableism signifies a rejection of the male body standard in sport, serving feminist goals. This study finds that fitness and sport magazines for women, by failing to include athletes with a disability, have also failed to break free from a male/ableist hegemonic body standard. Non-white women with a disability are almost invisible, emphasizing an ableist emphasis on sexual difference. However, it could be that the more each magazine rejects the boundaries of male hegemony, the more likely it is to partially reject ableism by including disability images.

*Key words:* media, disability, sexual difference, racial difference, sport.

Even in light of Title IX and the growth of women's sport participation, it has been well documented that women's sports in the United States receive far less media coverage than do men's sports (Box scores, 2005; *Women's Sports & Fitness*, 2002). Male-dominated team sports rule, with women's sports receiving less than 10 percent of coverage ("Box scores...", 2005; *Women's Sports & Fitness*, 2002). Media presentations of female athletes reinforce the notion that women are, ideally, *not* suited for sport; they are "sexually different"—inferior to men (Duncan, 1990; Schell, 2003). Black female athletes are even further marginalized by media preferences to frame women as sexually different (Collins, 2000; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998).

Cultural critics assert that the boundaries around media coverage of female sport are defined by male hegemony, which reinforces a hierarchy topped by able-bodied men, considered the epitome of the "rugged individualism" (DePauw, 1997; Hahn, 1987). Marginalization of women in sport is centered on the body, where physicality is central (Blinde & McCallister, 1999; Hall 1996). The female body is considered "disabled" in a sexist culture. "Women and the disabled are portrayed as helpless, dependent, weak, vulnerable, and incapable bodies" (Garland-Thomson, 2001, p. 8). Disability sport is not viewed as legitimate, but instead as something less; the notion of "disabled sport" has been likened to the ideological paradox presented by the notion of "lesbian mother" (Cherney, 2003; DePauw & Gavron, 1995; Golden, 2002; Thompson, 2002).

Female athletes with a disability, then, face double exclusion; they are perceived by the culture as "polluting" by virtue that they do not fit neatly into social categories (Douglas 1966; Hall 1997). They are culturally rendered as "asexual," yet they are also perceived as "female"—passive, dependent and weak (Blinde & McCallister, 1999; Schell 1999; Thomas & Smith, 2003). In a triple-bind are disabled women of color: not white, not able-bodied, not male; they are also social misfits, a threat to social "purity" (Douglas, 1966; Hall, 1997).

### *Integrating Research on Gendered Media Images*

Media criticism in regard to women and sport has been scrutinized in recent years for its tendency to focus on the experiences of white, able-bodied women as universal (Hall, 1996). Instead, feminist scholars are urged to "develop work that reflects the diversity of all women's lives and their struggles against multiple oppressions" (Hall, p. 44).

Beyond relationships between gender and race/ethnicity, feminist scholars have advocated a better understanding of the interrelationships between sexism and ableism (Garland-Thomson, 2001; Gerschick, 2000). "Disability cannot be adequately understood if it is separated from the other axes of power with which it intersects" and vice versa (Maas & Hasbrook, 2001, p. 22). It seems that feminist-inspired scholarship must be sensitive to the whole of oppression; as such sensitivity is a hallmark of recent feminist thought and a key component of its possibilities for social transformation (Marston, 1997).

This research examines the relationship between images of sport, disability, gender and race in general-interest women's sport magazines. Women's sport and fitness magazines offer an outlet that should provide an empowering space for female athletes, and, by extension, to female

athletes with a disability. This study critiques the photographic space provided to women in four such magazines. This analysis also ascertains how the magazines' positioning of female athletes as sexually different interacts with racialized depictions of female athletes with a disability. As might be expected in a culture where women and sport are not considered a natural pair, two of the three "new era" magazines have folded since the beginning of this research. However, the messages they contain provide important insight into the changing status of women on sport/media's "contested terrain;" further, an understanding of the content of these magazines can help us better assess and improve sporting depictions in future women's sports titles.

This study finds that female sport magazines, by failing to include athletes with a disability, have also failed to break free from a male/ableist hegemonic body standard. Non-white female athletes with a disability are almost invisible. However, the findings could also suggest that the more a magazine rejects the boundaries of male hegemony, the more likely it is to also (at least partially) reject ableism, serving feminist goals.

### **Sports/media, hegemony, and the body**

Cultural critics have indicted the sports/media complex for reinforcing cultural norms that create unequal power relationships based on binary oppositions: white/black, male/female, able-bodied/disabled, heterosexual/homosexual (Hall, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Jhally, 1989; Sage, 1990). It reinforces ideology that the "ideal body" is one fit and able to contribute to economic production (Hahn, 1988; Hargreaves, 1994). Hahn (1988) writes:

The human body is a powerful symbol conveying messages that have massive social, economic and political implications. In order to perpetuate their hegemony, ruling elites have attempted to impose what might be termed a moral order of the body, providing images that subjects are encouraged to emulate. (p. 29)

Sport in its elite, commercial form reflects and projects itself on the surveillance and manipulation of the body. The sports/media complex reflects the body as a site of struggle over symbolic and material rewards between dominant and subordinate groups; the "moral order" places those bodies deemed most valuable to economic production (male, able-bodied) at the top; gender/sexuality, race and able-bodiedness are factors in what is deemed the "norm" versus the "deviant" (Hahn, 1988; Hall, 1996; Hall, 1997). Disability, perhaps more than any other difference from the standard (such as femaleness) is considered deviant (Hahn, 1988). Douglas (1966) describes people with a disability as examples of cultural "misfits" that transgress symbolic boundaries and are thus deemed "polluting" in society.

#### *Hegemony and female athletes*

The most examined subordinate group in relation to the body, sport and male has been female athletes, and media framing of women in sport as sexually different has received considerable attention (Hall, 1996; Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf & Hardin, 2002; Lynn, Hardin & Walsdorf, 2004). Sexual difference is the term used to describe the presentation of girls and women as *naturally* (biologically) less suited for sport than men. (The term "gender difference,"

also used in literature about women in sports, is often used in a way that is interchangeable with the term sexual difference (Davis, 1997.)

Sexual difference is signified by the female body, which has been commodified (Hall, 1996). For instance, sports are socially acceptable or unacceptable for women based on how they conform to traditional ideas about roles for the female body (Gniazdowski & Denham, 2003; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). Non-contact sports that emphasize feminine ideals of grace, beauty, and glamour, such as figure skating and gymnastics, receive more favorable coverage (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf & Hardin, 2002; Schell, 1999).

Although emphasis on sexual difference is emphasized through text and photographs, photographs are considered to be more potent influences (Rowe 1999). The use of fewer photos of women (relative to men), downward camera angles, and photos that show women in passive poses can all reinforce sexual difference (Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Lynn, Hardin & Walsdorf, 2004). Several studies point to the framing of women as sexually different, with an emphasis on the body aesthetic, in sports photographs (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf & Hardin, 2002; Ryan, 1994). Even sports magazines designed for a female audience emphasize sexual difference in photographs. Schell's (1999) examination of *Women's Sports & Fitness* photos during the late 1990s and two studies that examined advertising photographs in *SI Women*, *Women's Sports & Fitness* and *Real Sports* found that sexual difference was reinforced in these magazines to varying degrees (Francis, 2003; Lynn, Walsdorf & Hardin, 2004).

### *The Media and Black Sporting Women*

Black sporting women have been marginalized by media depictions to a greater degree than have White women (Collins, 2000; Gordy, 2004; Hall, 1996; Hall, 2001; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). Black women have been framed as both racially and sexually different/deviant; they do not meet white American standards of beauty and are "defeminized" (Hall, 1996; Hall, 2001; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998).

Black women in sport have also received less attention from media researchers than their white counterparts, but a handful of studies have been published. A study of sports magazines including *Sports Illustrated* and *Women's Sports & Fitness* found that Black women were scarce. When they were depicted, they were more likely than white women to be depicted in team sports, considered more masculine than individual sports (Davis & Harris, 1998). Schell's (1999) examination of photos in *Women's Sports & Fitness* during the late 1990s found that images of minority sporting women were rare, in favor of homogenized white, thin women. The only athletic Black role models in the magazine were basketball players and track athletes. Tennis players Venus and Serena Williams were covered in the magazine but were presented as self-centered and egoistic (Schell, 1999). Another study, a content analysis of feature stories in every issue of *SI for Women*, found that Black female athletes were often depicted as assertive and aggressive (Gordy, 2004).

*Hegemony and athletes with a disability*

The number of athletes with a disability in the United States has grown over the past few decades; participation rates during the 1990s were characterized as explosive by a writer for *Sports Illustrated* (Hoffer, 1995). Hoffer went on to acknowledge the competitive legitimacy of disabled athletics: “Really, the distinction between wheelchair racers and the Olympians is fading at these high levels” (p. 65). Although there is virtually no data about overall participation in sport by U.S. women with a disability, a 1997 report indicated that 31 percent of Canadian women with a disability considered themselves “quite or very” physically active (DePauw, 1997b, p. 225).

Despite the continuing progress in technology, legal rights and sports participation, men and women with a disability are also stigmatized because their bodies do not reflect the “norm” (Shapiro, 1993; Taub, Blinde & Greer 1999). Media coverage of disability athletics reflects this stigmatism through non-coverage or stereotypical coverage. For instance, the Paralympics, the most elite sports event for athletes with a disability and one of the largest sporting events in the world, receives scant coverage. Coverage of the Salt Lake City games in 2002, which took place after the winter Olympics, was virtually non-existent in U.S. media except for coverage by the A&E network (Golden, 2002). Golden, who interviewed sports reporters at both events, found that many American journalists did not view disabled sports as valid because the journalists believed the athletes could not be competitive.

Researchers have found little coverage of disability athletics in newspapers and sports magazines. A 2000 study of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* found that athletes with a disability were absent in that magazine, providing no positive disabled role models for children (Hardin, Hardin, Lynn & Walsdorf, 2001). Another study, by Maas and Hasbrook (2001), examined photos in golf magazines and found no representation of golfers with visible disabilities. Schell (1999) analyzed photographs published in *Women’s Sports & Fitness* between 1997 and 1999. No women with a disability were depicted in the magazine.

A study that examined gendered depictions of disability assessed British newspaper coverage of the 2000 Paralympics. Thomas and Smith (2003) found that women were more often depicted in passive poses than men. More than half the photos studied appeared to hide athletes’ impairments. Another study that examined gendered depictions of disability in *Sports ‘n Spokes*, a magazine that covers wheelchair sports, found that women were depicted as active almost as often as were men, but that they were less likely to be presented as sports competitors (Hardin & Hardin, 2005).

Hahn (1987) and Shapiro (1993) assert that among media producers, advertisers may have the strongest motive to shun disability; advertising in a capitalist, consumer-driven culture must present the “ideal body,” one that reminds consumers of their own need to correct their imperfections to reach visual standards presented by ads. When models with a disability are depicted in ads, only those with “pretty” disabilities, such as attractive models who are deaf or who use a wheelchair, appear; sports-minded wheelchair users are toward the top of the media hierarchy of acceptable disability images (Haller, 2000; Haller & Ralph, 2002; Schantz &

Gilbert, 2001). Further, studies of advertising in sport-related magazines have also found that not a single image of disability appears (Hardin, Hardin, Lynn & Walsdorf, 2001; Schell, 1999).

### A Description of Women's Sport/Fitness Magazines

Although several women's fitness magazines had been on newsstands for years, a new type of women's sport/fitness title emerged during the mid-to-late 1990s, mostly in response to the surge in women's sports around the 1996 Olympics (Granatstein, 2000). Three general-interest magazines, *Women's Sports & Fitness*, *SI Women*, and *Real Sports*, were launched with fanfare during 1997-1998. The new magazines aimed to compete with established fitness-oriented titles such as *Shape* (Harvey, 1998). The magazine, launched in the early 1980s, has 1.5 million subscribers and offers workout, fitness, diet and beauty tips to readers. It does not report on sports events, although it occasionally features athletes who are women (Shape Print Advertising, 2002).

The newer magazines, which proclaimed a mission that involved a mix of stories on fitness and competitive sport, struggled to find an identity. *Sports Illustrated* launched *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport* in 1997, but within months, changed the magazine's name to *Sports Illustrated for Women*. In 2001, the magazine changed names again, to *SI Women*. The magazine published its last issue in December 2002. The Conde' Nast magazine *Sports for Women* (launched in 1997) changed its name to *Women's Sports & Fitness* in 1998. The magazine folded in September 2000 with a circulation of about 650,000 (Wollenberg, 2000). *SI Women* and *Women's Sports & Fitness* presented beauty-oriented fitness features – much like those in *Shape* – along with material about sports (Hardin, Lynn & Walsdorf, 2005).

The only women's sports magazine without the aesthetic fitness angle is *Real Sports*, a magazine that has struggled to gain advertisers and has, in the past two years, moved to an e-zine format. Launched by Amy Love in 1998, *Real Sports* does not include beauty features, but instead focuses on coverage of a variety of sports. In print form, it had a peak circulation of around 150,000. Editorial content includes recaps and features on all level of women's sports, from professional league play (WNBA, WUSA) to college and amateur ranks.

Studies of women in advertising and editorial photo images in these four magazines (without consideration of race or disability) has found that they fell on a continuum of sexual difference (Lynn, Hardin & Walsdorf, 2004; Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005). *Shape* presents women as passive and best suited for individual fitness routines designed to sculpt the body in the "ideal" feminine form. The other magazines fell behind *Shape* in their reinforcement of sexual difference. *WSF* also reinforced sexual difference, but to a slightly lesser degree. The magazine integrated strong images of sporting women with passive model photos. *SI Women* also sent mixed messages through its photos, but more often rejected sexual difference than did *WSF* by using action shots, and the magazine also provided strong images of active women in basketball, soccer and other team sports. *Real Sports* was at the far end of the continuum, providing a stark contrast from *Shape*.

Another study of three of the four magazines (all but *Shape*) found similar results; content analysis of features, covers and ads in *SI Women* and *Women's Sports & Fitness* found an

emphasis on athletes in feminine roles in those magazines, while a similar content analysis of *Real Sports* found a focus “almost exclusively on the sport and the athlete’s participation” (Francis 2003, p. 24).

### Research Questions

This study examines photos in four women’s athletic magazines to ascertain the inclusion of athletes with a disability and to determine if a relationship exists between their inclusion and the reinforcement of sexual and racial difference in magazine photographs. This study examines *Real Sports*, *SI Women (SIW)*, *Shape* and *Women’s Sports & Fitness (WSF)* for the presence of athletes with a disability in photographs. *Real Sports*, *SIW* and *WSF* were chosen as representative of the framing of women in the “new era” of women’s sports, introduced during the 1990s (Messner, 2002); the images in these magazines are gauged against the more traditional images presented in *Shape*, launched a decade earlier. The time period for the study was chosen to best reflect the energy of the “new era” for women’s sports after the new titles were introduced; the 1999 World Cup championships took place during this time period, and the summer 2000 Olympics also put attention on women’s sports (Granatstein, 2000).

This study explores the relationship between the level of sexual difference and the inclusion of athletes with a disability in the magazines. Photographs were chosen because of their power as visual magnets and cultural communicators.

Coding categories were designed to answer three primary research questions:

1. To what extent do the magazines under study include images of athletic women with a disability?
2. How do *Real Sports*, *SIW*, *Shape*, and *WSF* differ with respect to their inclusion of athletes with a disability?
3. Do the magazines that provide stronger reinforcement of sexual difference, such as *Shape* and *WSF*, differ from the more sport-focused magazines in their depictions of disability (*Real Sports*, *SIW*)?

### Method

#### *Data Collection*

Content analysis was the research method chosen to answer the research questions presented. Commonly defined as an objective, systematic, and quantitative discovery of message content, content analysis has also been determined as an effective way to examine media images of minority or historically oppressed groups (Stacks & Hocking, 1998; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991).

*Real Sports*, *SIW*, *Shape*, and *WSF* were the sampling unit for this study. Individuals in photos were coded separately and served as units of analysis. Advertising and editorial photographs in 6 issues of each magazine, from spring 1999 through summer 2000, were examined. Only photographs determined to include nonfamous and celebrity (human) models were studied; a total of 6,045 photo images were coded.

### *Recording Instrument*

Every individual in each photograph in the magazines was coded for gender and the presence of a discernible disability (indicated either by a visual cue in the photograph or identified in the caption). Other variables, such as level of activity (passive or active), sport type (none, team or individual), sport category (strength, aesthetic neutral or high-risk), and race (Black, White, can't tell or other) were also coded. These variables have been used in previous studies on the presentation of women in these and other sports magazines (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005; Lynn, Hardin & Walsdorf, 2004). Sports administration graduate students served as coders. Intercoder reliability was reached using the cover through page 10 of the January 1998 issue of *Shape* and the Fall 1997 issue of *SIW*. Holsti's reliability formula was used to assess coder reliability (Stacks & Hocking 1998). Intercoder reliability scores for the training sample ranged from 90 to 100 percent. To correct for chance agreement, Scott's Pi scores of .60 and higher were achieved.

### **Findings**

#### *Inclusion of Disability*

Of the more than 6,000 advertising and editorial images of women coded in the four magazines, only 22 were coded as possessing a discernible disability. No magazine reached one percent of its total images with those of athletes with a disability. See Table 1. The tiny number of images made statistical analysis of the disability-related images unfeasible. What follows is a discussion of frequencies and a descriptive analysis of the images.

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**Table 1**

***Total images of disability in each magazine.***

| Magazine           | Total images (F) | Disability images | Percent |
|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------|
| <i>Shape</i>       | 1,285            | 0                 | 0       |
| <i>WS &amp; F</i>  | 1,808            | 3*                | .1      |
| <i>SI Women</i>    | 1,928            | 13                | .7      |
| <i>Real Sports</i> | 1,024            | 6                 | .6      |

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\* Two of the three images were of able-bodied athletes temporarily immobilized by illness or injury

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Of the 22 images, two were of able-bodied women who were temporarily immobilized by illness or injury—leaving just 20 images of athletes of disabilities for analysis. Of those, eight images are contained in a single photo, of the Gallaudet women's basketball team. (Thus, the number of photos of athletes with discernible disabilities drops to 13.) All images of athletes with a disability were in editorial photos; no images of athletes with discernible disabilities in advertising photos in any of the magazines were found. See Table 2.

Jean Driscoll, a white wheelchair racer with perhaps more name recognition than any other wheelchair athlete in the United States ("On a Roll" 2003), was depicted twice—once in

two different magazines (*WSF* and *Real Sports*). Jami Goldman, a white double-amputee sprinter, also appeared in two magazines (*SIW* and *Real Sports*). Other athletes depicted included wheelchair basketball players, a Paralympic skier, an elite bicycle racer, a wheelchair tennis player and a Paralympic runner. Of the 20 women with a disability only one Black athlete, a basketball player from Gallaudet University, was depicted.

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**Table 2**  
*Images of disability in editorial photographs for each magazine*

| Magazine           | Total editorial images (F) | Disability images | Percent |
|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|---------|
| <i>Shape</i>       | 917                        | 0                 | 0       |
| <i>WS &amp; F</i>  | 1512                       | 3*                | .2      |
| <i>SI Women</i>    | 1432                       | 13                | .9      |
| <i>Real Sports</i> | 847                        | 6                 | .7      |

\*Two of the three images were of able-bodied athletes temporarily immobilized by illness or injury.

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#### *Editorial Photos: Differences Among the Magazines and Sexual Difference*

No magazine used disability images for even 1 percent of its editorial photo images; however, the magazines demonstrated slight differences in the number and types of disability images they used. *Shape*, a magazine that focuses on aesthetically oriented fitness in a frame of (white) traditional standards of femininity, did not use a single image of disability. *WSF*, which also framed women's sport in the boundaries of sexual difference, ran only one image of an athlete with a disability: white wheelchair racer Jean Driscoll. Driscoll was depicted crossing the finish line in the Boston Marathon.

*SIW* used the largest number of images: 13. However, all of the images were in one feature, a "No Limits" package in its Winter 1999-2000 issue that focused on disabled women. This feature included the one image of a Black athlete with a disability—a player in the group shot of the Gallaudet basketball team.

*SIW* simultaneously presented images that reinforced and rejected sexual difference. Women represented sport types and categories that have traditionally been deemed "male," thus providing empowering messages about women in sport. For instance, the magazine presented a picture of a basketball team and of a goalball player. Basketball and goalball are team sports, and basketball has traditionally been considered a "male" sport (Davis & Harris, 1998; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998).

At the same time, most images presented by *SIW* were of women in individual sports considered more feminine: tennis, cycling, and running, for instance. Further, most of the images were of women passively posed for the camera instead of engaged in sport, indicating sexual

difference (Duncan, 1990). For instance, a photo of white goalball player Jen Armbruster, depicted her in a passive pose, lying on a basketball floor. Armbruster is visually impaired. Another photo considered striking for its messages about disabled women in sports is that of Muffy Davis, a white paraplegic downhill skier. Davis is posed for the camera in a setting that depicts her skiing through clouds (instead of on a downhill snow slope, where she competes). The photo could be interpreted as trivializing her accomplishments as not “real.”

The *SIW* feature did, however, contain the only image of a Black athletic woman with a disability: Cassey Ellis. She was posed passively (standing, gazing at the camera) and represented a sport stereotypical for Black athletes: basketball. As such, the image simultaneously reinforced sexual difference and racial difference.

*Real Sports* ran fewer images of athletes with a disability than *SIW*, but used them in more than one issue, integrating them with other feature photos. Every image was active, and none disguised the athlete’s impairment. One photo was a standalone from the 2000 national championship game for women’s wheelchair basketball. This photo in particular is striking because of its rejection of sexual difference: It presents white female sporting bodies that don’t meet the hegemonic norm engaged in a team sport culturally considered male. The photo is played prominently, on a full page close to the front of the magazine. Another photo, of Jami Goldman, accentuates her body diversity by showing her in one photo without her prosthetics. *Real Sports*, however, fails to depict any Black women with a disability, reinforcing racist ableism by rendering sporting Black disabled bodies as invisible.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This research implies a link between disabled sports and women’s sports that should be explored, defined, refined and strengthened. In a wider sense, perhaps it suggests a stronger link between disability studies and feminist studies, the disabled rights movement and the women’s rights movement. This idea is not a new one although in practice it has not been widely accepted (Blinde & McCallister, 1999; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Gerschick, 2000; Marston, 1997).

The highly limited number of photos depicting disability makes it difficult to draw conclusions about differences among the magazines. However, the findings, read in light of previous studies and literature on disability, the body, sport and hegemony, support notions that: 1) Sport-related advertising continues to emphasize the hegemonically defined “ideal body” through exclusion of disability, perpetuating the “deviant” status of disability; and 2) Athletes with a disability, especially non-white athletes, have not been integrated adequately into editorial content. The results also invite speculation that the more the publication is willing to reject male hegemony, the more likely it seems to also reject ableist hegemony.

#### *Disability and Advertising*

In light of the sport/media’s role in perpetuating male, ableist hegemony, it is no surprise that advertisers in sport/fitness-related media would shun images related to disability in favor of an ideal body image. While feminists have criticized the ideal body standard for its disempowering role in women’s lives, this standard also reinforces marginal status for people with a

disability. Perhaps no other minority group in the United States is so marginalized in advertising, in relation to its actual proportion in the population. Unfortunately, the ideal body standard is a key force behind consumerism in the United States. The standard, however, must be reconfigured if people with a disability are to move from the margins; any inclusion would move them forward from their present status.

### *Racialized (Non)depictions of Disability*

The second conclusion highlights the ableist orientation of sport media and their tendency to emphasize racial and sexual difference. Lack of attention from the media feeds a spiral of marginalization and exclusion for disabled women, emphasizing their already low social status and “keeping in their place” within U.S. culture. Further, the marginalization of athletic women with a disability robs disabled girls of positive role models. The population affected by the absence of positive images is substantial: The U.S. Census in 2000 indicated that 21.2 million people (8.2 percent of the population) reported having a physical or sensory disability. The percentage of females between 16 and 64 years of age in the U.S. with a physical or sensory disability is approximately 8.5 percent. Further, in every age category, non-white Americans report higher rates of disability than white Americans (Waldrop & Stern, 2003).

The complete invisibility of non-white disabled women was expected, in light of previous studies. Black disabled women are virtually guaranteed the bottom spot in the hegemonic hierarchy: because they do not conform to white standards of femininity, they are not perceived as sexually different (“feminine”) enough to garner mainstream sport coverage. Their lack of able-bodiedness further marginalizes them.

Yet Black women are part of the “explosion” in competitive disability sports competition in the United States (Hoffer 1995, p. 64). Examples of Black women who would easily fit on the pages of *Real Sports*, *SIW* or any women’s sports magazine are April Holmes, a member of the USA Disabled Track Team, or Andrea Woodson, a member of the USA women’s wheelchair basketball team and player for the Lady Texans (*Runner’s Amazing Comeback*, 2003; Woodson, 2004). Others compete at elite levels in a variety of sports, including wheelchair basketball; minority participation in such sports in any part of the United States often mirrors regional population demographics (Woodson, 2004). Further, sporting Black women with a disability could be role models for a large population; the highest disability rates in the United States are among the Black population (Waldrop & Stern, 2003).

One argument that might be made by sport/media decision makers is that potential readers should not dictate their coverage; instead, what is “newsworthy” ought to dictate coverage. However, unlike traditional men’s sports media, the women’s sport/fitness magazines in this study are not event driven; they do not provide coverage of events. Instead, coverage is subjective and based on such values as sport seasons and personalities. Disabled sports (such as able-bodied sports) offer these values.

Another argument is that disabled sports don’t have enough of a following to justify coverage. But disabled athletics can’t hope to gain a following when awareness of such sports remains so low because of media exclusion. As Cherney (2003) points out, the material values of

sport make the exclusion of athletes with a disability more troubling; they are robbed, by an ableist culture and media, of the opportunity to be compensated for their skilful participation in sport.

Women's sport media, it was hoped, would be more inclusive of athletes with a disability—especially because women's sport media, by definition, addresses at least to a small degree the need to expand notions of the acceptable sporting body. It seems that women's sport/fitness media has simply jostled the existing hegemonic sports hierarchy without attempting to dismantle it. This falls far short of the feminist mission that would call for dismantling “dominations” of all kinds (Marston, 1997).

Perhaps women's sport producers and media fail to fully understand the nature of male hegemony; as long as the ideal body standard remains unchallenged, women's sports will never have the same stature as men's. The ideal body standard, and its role in sport, must be redefined. That redefinition must, by its very nature, be inclusive of disability. DePauw (2000) argues that with time, images of athletes with a disability can alter traditional views of the normal body, a change that would serve to flatten the “moral order” of the body.

### *Rejection of Male Hegemony/Rejection of Ableism*

The results of this research suggest that the more a magazine embraces sporting women, the more likely it is to accept athletes with a disability. It is almost paradoxical, considering the fact that traditional sports media remains staunchly ableist, that the stronger the sport orientation of a women's magazine, the less ableist it became. Rejection of sexual difference seems to be related to positive images of disabled sporting bodies.

Much of this acceptance may be a function of the cultural constructions of disability and gender as related to the cultural anti-link between women's sport and gender norms. Traditional femininity requires adherence to heterosexual beauty and body ideals, and participation in sport requires a willingness to suspend or reject these ideals. As Gerschick (2000) articulates, women with physical disabilities are already framed as “non-feminine,” as they are never able to achieve the feminine body ideal. Thus, “women with a disability are less likely than their able-bodied counterparts to be limited by many of the gendered expectations and roles” (p. 1268). In other words, women with a disability are at the same time more and less suitable in mediated depictions of sport. While they can never hope to meet an able-bodied standard, their cultural status as “genderless” is fitting for representations of women's sport that seek to throw off the limits of hegemonic gender roles.

It is hoped, however, that the correlation between the magazines' sport orientation and the presentation of athletes with a disability indicates more: a realization that at some level, there is an understanding that the fate of women's and disability sports is linked, and that a true redefining of sport (reflected in sport media) must take place for women to experience sporting equality. This seems to reflect what Hargreaves (1994) has described as the use of oppositional ideas to subvert dominant/oppressive ones, potentially leading to slow but sure cultural change. It is interesting to note that the newest U.S. general-interest women's sports title—HerSports—

has already integrated some images of women with a disability in its pages although it has published less than six issues.

Any effort to redefine sport—to dismantle it as a hegemonic institution—will have to be Herculean to succeed. The resistance to such effort is apparent in this research; two of the four women's sport magazines coded in this study have folded. It is interesting, however, that the two magazines that have ceased to exist are the magazines that tried to “straddle the fence,” as it were—offering images that both rejected and reinforced sexual difference. It seems the lesson here is that going halfway is ultimately a losing game; there does not seem to be tolerance between the status quo and re-presentation of sport in ways that ultimately reject male (able-bodied) hegemony.

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