

Femininity and Sports

Feminists and sociologists struggle with competing notions of the roles of women in sport, specifically in stereotypes regarding their bodies and opportunities present in the world of sports. Compared to earlier times, women athletes have begun to have experiences enabling them to define femininity in ways that contradict traditional definitions of femininity used in American culture. However, historical perceptions still prevail and as a society, we still are a ways away from complete gender equity, both in terms of image and opportunity.

There is often an overlapping image stereotype surrounding women athletes and their supermodel counterparts. Female athletes are constantly encouraged to be sexy and thin but possessing enough strength to participate in their respective sport effectively. The media constantly reinforces this stereotype that there should be a certain level of sex appeal among women athletes. Once a year, Sports Illustrated issues their Swimsuit Issue at newsstands across America. Because female supermodels are the cornerstone in a magazine that traditionally places Terrell Owens and Derek Jeter on the cover, society immediately latches on to this concept. In order to be considered an athlete and be placed on the cover of a sports magazine, one must be sexy and thin. There is not a better place to emphasize beauty and women athletics than in a magazine traditionally supported and read by men.

During the 1999 Women's World Cup title game against China, Brandi Chastain struck a penalty kick into the back of the net and spontaneously ripped off her top in

celebration, exposing a sports bra. This situation wreaked havoc in media outlets across America, as writers focused more on what they considered a striptease rather than her efforts to lead the women to their second World Cup victory. It is possible that this situation further made evident the heterosexual view that women shouldn't play sports unless their bodies are perfect, sexy and "right" according to traditional femininity standards. Traditional definitions prevail in both the Swimsuit Issue and World Cup scenarios.

Exposure to women's athletics is also on the rise in American culture. As a result, traditional views that people won't pay to watch female athletics have at least partially been eliminated. Although men's sports still dominate media coverage, women's sports are beginning to be very popular among both men and women. If they were not receiving good reviews, money-lucrative contracts with ESPN and Fox Sports Net would be eliminated. ESPN now has a contract to cover every game of the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament and Fox Sports Net has a contract with the Big XII to cover women's volleyball. In addition, ESPN covers WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) games with some contests aired on basic cable stations such as NBC and ABC. From a historical perspective, women's athletics are commonly covered. Even if men's sports are exposed more than women's sports, the traditional gender ideology is threatened.

In addition to airing female contests, networks have increasingly hired women as commentators. In the last two to three years, ESPN has hired two female play-by-play commentators to cover football games, placing a male "color" man alongside her. This obviously challenges the traditional gender role of women, but even more so because of

the traditional notion that football is the game for America's men. In the last decade, attractive females such as Michelle Tafoya and Bonnie Bernstein have been found roaming the sidelines, a position obviously less coveted than being in the booth. In addition, women find themselves in positions at ESPN covering Sports Center and provide analysis on all major topics in sports, male or female. The fact that women are doing the play by play for America's masculine game suggests that American society is not far from females broadcasting the Super Bowl or NCAA men's Final Four.

In terms of opportunity, women have experienced increases in chances to participate in sports. However, traditional femininity definitions have inhibited them from receiving the type of recognition they deserve. Prior to the 1970s, femininity definitions urged women to only participate in sports that involved graceful movement because women were considered frail, and therefore unable to take the contact delivered in traditional men's sports. They participated in figure skating, ice dancing, gymnastics, swimming, tennis and golf, but avoided such contact sports as wrestling, boxing and football. Today, however, women are able to participate in many contact sports frowned upon prior to the 1970s. Many universities now promote women's wrestling. Several states have adopted a women's tackle football league. Women's kickboxing has become more and more popular. All in all, the opportunities that women have today far outweigh any historical comparison.

As far as coaching and administration, however, it seems as though we have a ways to go to achieve gender equity. Traditional definitions of femininity suggest that women are not capable, nor do they have the personality, to coach or be an administrator at the highest level. However, there have been some very successful female coaches,

such as Pat Summit, whom has compiled a 913-177 record over 33 seasons at the helm of the University of Tennessee women's basketball program. Summit's case is rare, as the common ideology suggests that women do not possess the characteristics needed to head a team or an entire athletic program. In addition, with the vast increase in women's sports, there has been an increased demand for qualified coaches. Data suggests that men receive these jobs more frequently than do women. There has also been a drop-off in the number of women's coaches and administrators of women's programs since the 1970s, perhaps a testament to a newly defined feminine ideology. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for a male to coach a female athletic team, however, fewer than 2 percent of women's coaching positions are of men's programs. This defines femininity in a way that suggests that women do not have the knowledge or personality to guide a men's program.

In conclusion, women are experiencing more and more opportunities than they have historically. In some ways, females have been able to escape traditional gender definitions, enhancing their participation in traditionally male dominated sports and experiencing new heights in media. However, still present is an underlying ideology of femininity, unfortunately inhibiting women from providing varying valuable perspectives to the wide world of sports.