

Reaction Paper 1: The Swimsuit Issue

“Sex sells” in our increasingly sexual culture, but the release of the 45th annual *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue only reinforces how sport has become intrinsically tied to sex. Before the “idealized body image” discussion, the “what sports are really about” argument must take shape.

According to Meriam Webster Online, sport is defined as “a source of diversion, or physical activity engaged in for pleasure.” The swimsuit models not only aren’t running around (physical activity?) with a strand of dental floss covering their bodies, but really aren’t smiling either, implying that their “activity” isn’t provoking any sense of diversion. According to the above definition, the title of *Sports Illustrated*’s Swimsuit Issue is blatantly incorrect; “sports” seems misplaced.

It’s hard to blame *SI*, given how our national sports media continues to beat around the bush, covering anything and everything off the field (in a negative light), but mostly ignoring the intrinsic good of sport. The Swimsuit Issue only reinforces how our mainstream media uses sport as an outlet to promote controversy over accomplishment. Our society is driven to controversy, and *SI* thrives on this very concept -- the “real” issue immediately following the swimsuit issue’s release annually publishes readers’ comments in their “Letters” section. Not once have I seen, “Hey, thanks for such a fantastic swimsuit issue. Really enjoyed Marissa Miller!” Instead, such letters possess the words “disgusting,” “lewd” and “canceled.” And the *SI* managing editors love it.

Sports Illustrated remains one of the few mainstream sports media outlets that historically and currently provides (mostly) very good investigative reporting. *SI* attempts to tell the untold story, is generally unbiased, and the magazine rarely attempts to prove unproveable information, traits that are rarely found in today’s culture. Unfortunately, the Swimsuit Issue casts a shadow over these positives. If males 18-35 were the sole consumers of sport, and by nature the sole consumers of such a magazine as *SI*, then the swimsuit issue seems reasonable. However, sport transcends generations, extending to young children, the elderly, and everyone in between. Generally, sports fans would rather not see the magazine annually. Many parents cancel their subscriptions because of the Swimsuit Issue, and for that, children may miss out on the thoughtful journalism that *SI*

prides itself on. There is much to be learned from sport, and *SI* conveys that our games are about more than the win and loss column, hard work, passion, determination, the journey of competition, and now ... sex?

The person that tells you that the Swimsuit Issue isn't about sex is the same person that turns on ESPN just to see when and where Isiah Thomas used the 'B' word and to see what Tank Johnson or Wayne Gretzky's wife is up to. These same people believe that sport extends to every imaginable off-the-field incident, and for these delusional folks, the sports umbrella somehow possesses the Swimsuit Issue. If it's not about sex, what's it about? Some photos hardly display a swimsuit, so it's hard to argue that it's a fashion magazine. In some images, you have to play "Where's Waldo" to simply find something that resembles a swimsuit on the page. If it's not sport, not a fashion magazine, what is it? "Sport" is a scapegoat for a publication that needs a scapegoat to thrive. The 18-35 demographic justifies the magazine's existence to the rest of *SI*'s readership base based on the definition of "sport." Equally disturbing are the ways in which women are portrayed.

From a feminist perspective, the Swimsuit Issue in no way recognizes women's athletic accomplishments, but instead represents how women are seen as mere sex objects who don't deserve credit for their on-the-field excellence to be displayed for a national sports audience. Women's sports aren't covered nearly to the extent that men's sports are (although in recent years there has been a steady increase in coverage), and this only reinforces why idealistic photos of women in swimsuits suggests that women's "athletic" prowess can only be defined by 18-35-year-old men flipping a page.

The *Sports Illustrated* mega production highlights cultural flaws of how we perceive women and how women are "supposed" to represent American society. It's hard to escape these cultural flaws, especially because sex and idealized images (advertising, cheerleaders, etc.) now accompany sport in its finest form. Sport, from archery to the Super Bowl, from the Olympics to nine-man high school football, is supposed to be a diversion—an escape from such cultural flaws. When picking up the Swimsuit Issue, we must remind ourselves why sports were ever sports in the first place. I don't think that a

woman, frowning while naked on an obscure Mediterranean island, can be mentioned in that reminder.