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REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN ATHLETES IN THE MEDIA

SARAH KUSTOK

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Athletics has widely been identified as a powerful arena for the ideological construction of male dominance, where the values accorded to masculinity reinforce the hegemonic practices of our society (Cunningham, 2003; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Kay, 1999; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Kane, 1988). The sport culture is one that has been perceived as a male domain, where the qualities of competitiveness and toughness have been an expectation typically associated with male athletes in contact sports. It is a fairly recent phenomenon that women have had the opportunity to actively take part in the organized games that are attached to our nation's identity, and a great deal of interest derives from the advancements that have been made throughout the years. In 1971, the AIAW, Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, was created to help promote and build a foundation for women in collegiate sports (www.womenssportfoundation.org). The AIAW became the force and push for the nation's female athletes who sought competitive opportunities at a higher level than mere recreation. This first step gained momentum for the support of women's sports, but was soon bypassed when Congress approved Title IX on June 23, 1972. Following the passage of Title IX, an explosion in the sheer numbers of female participation occurred (Smith, 1998). The law guaranteed equal access and opportunity for females in sports by prohibiting sex discrimination at educational institutions receiving federal funds. More importantly, the aftermath of this law proved that the commonplace notion of females lacking an interest in athletic participation was no longer a valid argument. Not only has

an appeal in participation increased, but since the introduction of Title IX, a greater interest in research on the media coverage of women's sports has come about due to the powerful influence the media holds on ideals and views of the American society (Cunningham, 2003; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

My study aims for the most accurate portrayal of how societal perceptions of female athletics have changed. Through the impact that the U.S. National women's soccer has had on the sporting world, and most importantly the nation, the creation of identity for female athletes can, in part, be analyzed by tracking the team's coverage in mainstream media sources. While some researchers are pointing towards the idea of a celebratory and liberating notion of femininity in the way women athletes are portrayed, much of the literature and research continues to perpetuate the views of media representations that hinged on the late 1980's and early 1990's. This study provides a contribution to the accumulating body of research by conducting a historical analysis on how the amount and type of coverage for women's athletics changed throughout the past fifteen years of the US Women's National soccer team's dominance in their sport. Additionally, I will look at the ways that representations in these media sources rhetorically construct identities for these individuals as women. The following chapter introduces the development of both female athletic participation in the United States, as well as the importance of soccer as a gateway sport for the growth of women athletes' popularity on the field and in the media. Insight into the impact of the media and

athletics on socialization and identity construction will be discussed in order to understand the importance of this area of research.

ATHLETICS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

The intense love and scrutiny of athletics has now become deeply rooted in day-to-day societal life. Through characteristics found in sport, many Americans fittingly relate values and beliefs, such as standards of excellence, comparative worth, and even right and wrong, in accordance with what the exposure to athletics can teach beyond the playing field (Tharp, 1996). It is not only advocates of athletics, or those closely tied to the field, but the people of our nation who recognize what an impact it plays in shaping lives, particularly those of the youth. A 1996 poll conducted by U.S. News and Bozell Worldwide on Americans' attitudes toward sports and the Olympics showed there is an overwhelming appreciation for sports in our culture. The survey shows that Americans believe that the activity of watching sports has a positive impact on society, and that competitive sports aid in teaching children valuable life lessons. The virtues created through competition translate into advantages that can be applied to various areas of everyday life and the challenges and situations that are faced. For example, the 1996 U.S. News/Bozell poll uncovers that the majority of Americans strongly believe the lessons of sports positively translates to aspects of social, educational, and professional life. In this sense, the impact becomes far reaching in questioning what messages are being created and represented in reinforcing perceptions of what it means to be an athlete, particularly a female athlete.

Ransdell & Wells (1999) discuss the importance of sociocultural factors that contribute to the contrast in perceptions between males and females that have affected women's participation in sport and even physical activity in general. Immoral exhibitions of gambling, alcohol, and aggressive behavior have been cited, as well as the belief that this type of exertion would injure the reproductive capabilities of women (Ransdell & Wells, 1999). But, one of the most pervasive barriers stated is the media's contribution to the marginalization of women through mild humor, sarcasm, and trivialization of performance accomplishments by focus on non-athletic factors. This discussion raises even greater importance because of the effect this behavior has on the formation of feminine gender roles that ultimately play a part in girls' participation in sport (Thomas & French, 1985). Thomas & French (1985) firmly state that subtle messages implicating certain activities are more appropriate for boys than girls socializes females with beliefs of gender that inhibits young girls from taking on the challenges and obstacles that sport teaches.

Gagnon (1997) reported findings that confirm the sport culture is an important socialization institution and behaviors, values, and messages inherent to culture have effects in other spheres of their life (p. 65). It is suggested that the media's treatment and portrayal of athletic behaviors "normalizes" what the viewers gage as appropriate elements of identity in society (Gagnon, 1997). A final conclusion reached by Gagnon (1997) was that the physical and psychological attributes that the media tends to associate with success in athletic contests transfer into requirements for status in most adolescent and preadolescent peer groups. In this sense, the messages and depictions hold a deeper

impact on the construction and perception of identity than the mere entertainment and business purposes of the media.

WOMEN IN ATHLETICS

Nowhere has the positive influence of athletics been more recently felt in the United States than through the increasing opportunities, awareness, and participation of women and girls in sports. Women have begun surpassing world records held by men only ten to fifteen years ago. In 1971-72, about 30,000 women, according to the Women's Sports Foundation, participated in college sports. By 1994-95, that number had increased nearly fourfold to more than 110,000 women. During the same period, the number of female high school athletes jumped from about 300,000 to more than 2 million--about 1 in every 3 girls, according to the Women's Sports Foundation. To truly understand the rapid development, it is important to note that boys' high school participation rates during the same time period have remained steady. Close to fifty percent of high school boys take part in sports, which equals roughly 3.5 million participants per year. Nationwide, more college women have more athletic teams available to them than ever before. Today, the average offering for female athletes is 8.32 teams per school, well above the numbers in 1972 and 1978, the years of Title IX enactment and the mandatory compliance date for Title IX. In 1972, there was only a little over 2 female teams per school, and in 1978, the number rose to 5.61 per school. Female collegiate athletes now have over 8400 teams available to them at the nation's NCAA schools.

The growth is tremendous, and the acceptance and accomplishment that comes with being a female athlete continues to make strides. But, it is not only in the years directly following Title IX that have seen the biggest changes, nor has the impact that has been felt in participation rates curtailed. Focus must be placed on the bursts that have occurred in just the past ten years that have contributed to the intensification of women's athletics. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, during the two-year period of 2002 to 2004, 270 new collegiate women's teams were added. Between the years of 2000-2004, the creation of 631 new teams occurred. In just the last six years, the number of new women's collegiate teams totaled 1155.

Clearly, the mere aspect of participation makes athletics a force and fixture of American society. It is not only the personal ties that create the indelible mark on our identity, but the national obsession with sports is coupled with other powerful social forces as well. The remarkable influence of the media and the explosive expansion of the entertainment business have made a drastic impact on the proliferation of sports in perception and ideological creation. The importance of looking at the ways athletics impacts national thought transfers into the importance of appreciating the advancement of females in society. Women have taken on new roles and responsibilities in our nation over the last few decades in ways that far exceed participation in mere "games." Professional, political, and societal roles have paved the way for women to achieve greater power and equality in various walks of life. Constraints that once kept women from areas perceived as a "man's territory" are now being broken down and restructured to give opportunities that were not present a decade ago. While seemingly inconsequential to the greater stakes that members of our nation face everyday, the

avenue of athletics has proven to be as powerful in creating identity, setting precedence, and formulating a sense of initiative and self-confidence in women as any other realm.

The ability for women to assert themselves on a playing field once deemed as “masculine” opens doors in other aspects of life.

While total equality remains to be seen in participation numbers, it is evident that women’s athletics has taken a stronghold on the nation and continues to push beyond acceptance into admiration and celebration. But even though the opportunities for play are increasingly present, the question becomes, in what ways does an outlet like the media influence perceptions and beliefs about women’s athletics in both contributing to the construction of identity by the viewers and by the athletes themselves? The aim of my study is to answer this question through focusing on the sport of soccer and how it has been one of the most pivotal avenues for women to popularize the role of female athletes in the media and society as a whole.

SOCCER AS A GATEWAY SPORT

While changes are occurring for women in all sports, one of the most important factors in this growth has been the sport of soccer. Even though soccer ranks only fourth in the most available college sports, it is not only the quantity of participation, but the dramatic jumps that have been made as of late. According to the Women’s Sports Foundation, soccer exhibits the greatest growth of any sport in the last twenty-eight years, having increased forty fold. It is now offered for women on 88.6 % of college campuses, while in 1977 it was only found on 2.8% of the campuses. It is not only on college campuses and in the professional arena that soccer has exploded in popularity, but

soccer acts as a gateway sport for many young girls, in that it is the earliest opportunity to participate in a contact sport. The media representations of this group of women are so important due to the positive socialization that has blossomed from the popularity of soccer, which has traditionally been viewed as a “gender inappropriate” sport. Bissell (2004) suggests that sports media exposure is related to the way women feel about their body shape. In using the 2000 Olympic Games as a research tool, Bissell (2004) found that both sports participation and sports media exposure were related to a more positive body image attitude in “nonlean” sports. This categorical distinction includes soccer and basketball, or contact sports, in contrast to gymnastics, swimming, and figure skating as “lean” sports.

The sport of women’s soccer has been particularly interesting because the 1999 Women’s World Cup marked the most dramatic increase in the amount of fans, revenues and mere popularity for a women’s sport, and even some men’s sports, than had ever been previously accomplished (Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002). Typically classified as a “male-appropriate” sport, the aggressive, contact nature of soccer falls out of the realm that previous research claims as media and societal popularity in women’s sports. Additionally, Markovits & Hellerman (2001), point out that the increased attention on women’s soccer is so pivotal because the sport itself is not necessarily a part of the national conscience like the sports of basketball or softball. Furthermore, the sport of soccer, whether played by men or women, has only recently become semi-popular, and has never been a highly publicized sport for either gender. In that sense, women’s soccer did not have an established fan base initiating this push for attention, whereas a sport like women’s basketball or softball can potentially draw cross-over fans from the men’s game

(Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). In exemplifying this concept, the consistent message has been that this group of female soccer players has built the game from the ground up.

Additionally, a large body of research focuses on the media's attempt to showcase women's athletics by underscoring the differences between men and women. Messner (1988) stated that the sports receiving the most media coverage succeed in suggesting men's dominance over women because of the inherent physical design of the male body. For this reason, increased female coverage is said to only further stress natural differences of performance between men and women within a sport, in order to perpetuate the ideology of male superiority in athletics (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). When comparing media coverage of athletics in American society, this line of reasoning can support those such as basketball, baseball/softball, golf, etc., but does not apply to the sport of soccer. While still battling to gain increased media coverage on a professional and collegiate level, the sport of soccer finds its popularity most aptly in the parks and schoolyards filled with America's youth. A sport that requires minimal finances in equipment or field upkeep, soccer is one of the most participated activities for children at a young age (www.fifa.org). The U.S. Women's National soccer team, including Mia Hamm, Brandi Chastain, Michelle Akers, Kristine Lilly, and Julie Foudy, stand as the first players in the sport, either men or women, who have turned themselves into household names. The success and exposure of this team have sparked a greater interest and popularity for the sport itself, surpassing recognition of the group's counterpart male squad.

Over the past decades soccer has opened up the most doors for women's involvement in sport, and the US Women's National soccer team proved to be a critical

component to the progression of women athletics' representation in the media. Even though soccer does not rank among the most publicized sports in the nation, the U.S. women's soccer team's worldwide success was an integral part of the changes that occurred in the amount and type of media coverage for female athletics.

HISTORY OF U.S. WOMEN'S SOCCER

For the United States, the beginning of success for the group can be marked with a victory in the 1991 World Cup Championship. The inaugural gold medal in the 1996 Olympics and second World Cup Championship in 1999 initiated recognition for the achievements and turned the heads of both the media and fans. The team's run finished with a second Olympic gold medal in 2004 and the retirement of the core group of athletes that earned and owned increased media attention for women's soccer.

In Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sports, Lissa Smith (1998) provides a thorough background of soccer internationally and domestically. In the United States, the first organized national team came in 1985, when the Olympic Committee and the U.S. Soccer Federation hosted the first Olympic Festival for the women's sport in Louisiana. In 1991, FIFA, the world administrators for soccer, granted approval for the international Women's World Championship, a tournament on par with the World Cup. Led by North Carolina head coach Anson Dorrance, the U.S. team, who had played its first competitive match only six years earlier, won the inaugural women's World Cup in Guangzhou, China. The Americans became the first U.S. world champions in soccer since the game was introduced 128 years ago in the country.

The team placed third in the 1995 World Cup, but the achievement that paved the way for the popularity of the team came in the 1996 Olympic Games gold medal victory. This also marked the first year women's soccer was admitted as an official Olympic sport. The advancements of media coverage can be aptly shown in the attention increase in just the five-year span of the initial championship. After the 1991 World Cup win, the team was met with coverage by one media representative, but in the 1996 gold medal victory, 2,000 plus media members were in attendance. Mia Hamm, the team's top scorer and best player, was offered endorsements and media attention. Already a spokesperson for Nike, who named a building after her at their Oregon Headquarters, Hamm appeared in television commercials for Pert Plus Shampoo, Power Bar, Pepsi, and Earth Grain breads, all companies that fell outside the realm of merely soccer. Hamm appeared on *David Letterman*, *Regis and Kathie Lee*, as well as being voted as one of *People* magazine's list of the fifty most beautiful people in the world. As Smith (1998) so succinctly states in *Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sports*, "The image of Hamm and her teammates...tells us...being a soccer player doesn't mean we won't grow up to be women...Being a soccer player can help us grow up to become better women" (p. 266).

In 1999, the team earned their second World Cup championship while drawing an average of more than 68,000 fans for its six matches. This included a 90,000-plus turnout at the Rose Bowl, marking a number well above the most to watch any women's sporting event in this country's history. Over 40 million people in the United States viewed the final match on television. The success helped raise the profile of female athletes, not just in America, but around the world. Following a record 25 wins in 1999, with two losses

and two ties, the team won *Sport Illustrated's* "Sportswomen of the Year." The 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team was the only other team in the 46-year history of the award to be so honored.

In a world symposium on July 7, 1999, that discussed the concern over the future of our youth, the former U.S. Secretary of Health & Human Services, Donna E. Shalala, applauded the actions of the U.S. Women's Soccer team. Shalala informed members of the way the women regularly volunteer their time to talk with children, make public appearances and give media interviews about the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

Shalala stated that "while women like Kristine Lilly, Joy Fawcett and Shannon MacMillan are making sports history, they are also committed to promoting positive life examples as role models to the youth."

"I think there is a new social contract between sports and society. A new recognition that says professional sports have a responsibility to not just the shareholders, but to its stakeholders: young people who look to athletes as more than role models - they see them as heroes" ("Girl Power, Smoke-Free Kids and Soccer", 1999, p. 1-2).

These women haven't proven the pride and admiration shown for their achievements goes far beyond just winning soccer games, but becoming role models because of who they are in their entirety. During the 1999 World Cup, a host of commentators credited the team's players with having popularized a more independent and athletic image for young women in America.

Mariah Burton Nelson, a former Stanford University basketball player stated, "Told that certain sports make women look 'like men,' they notice the truth: working out doesn't make them look like men; it makes them happy. It makes them smile. It makes

them radiate health and power. It makes them feel good. It makes them look like an athlete" (Smith, 1998, Introduction x).

FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

As evidenced, a large part of the focus on women's sports surrounds the notion of what it means to physically, emotionally, and socially be both a female and an athlete because of the inherent contradictions perceived between the two. The theoretical base that I will use to analyze representations of female athletes derives from the theories of various researchers that look at the way identity and gender roles are constructed and enacted, with relation to societal acceptance and teaching. How did this group challenge standard notions of femininity and subscribed notions of masculinity in sport to win over the hearts of America? The most applicable concept is gender fluidity, or a multifaceted, fragmented notion of gender, in which I will examine depictions of the female athletes both on and off the field. Butler's (1990) suggestion of "woman" as multiple and discontinuous, rather than a static, universal self, exhibits the very notion of women athletes in the media. Actions of the athletes and representations in the media are made accountable in terms of societal expectations rather than a fixed "being" of gender. Contradicting notions of performing gender to fulfill sex categories becomes more readily accepted through the transactions of others that share and celebrate multiple identities.

The categories that I will focus on in terms of analyzing gender fluidity will be through Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell's (2002) study of competitive vs. pleasure mark of women in contact vs. non-contact sports, West & Zimmerman's (1987) notion of body

images and the influence of circumstances, and Kenneth Gergen's (1991) concept of the relational self, in order to understand how these factors contribute to the performance and understanding of gendered identities. In terms of competitive vs. pleasure marks in the media, analysis will question the previous literature claim that women athletes are more positively shown participating in sports for pleasure, enjoyment, and health benefits, rather than the traditionally male motive of competition and combativeness. West & Zimmerman's (1987) ideas on the body and "doing gender" point to this phenomenon as something people "do" in interactions, in which we perform a role that is highly influenced by circumstance and a need to meet cultural expectations. This will give a direction into investigating the behaviors, actions, and descriptions in the context they are given, as well as looking at the various meanings imposed on the women athletes through visual images. Gergen's (1991) thoughts on the relation self can be applied to the way identity is constructed for a woman athlete in terms of the relation she holds on the team and with her teammates. A large part of our identity is created and understood through those we associate and are associated with. Through these bases of theory, the concept of gender fluidity in the media representations of the U.S. Women's soccer team members can be more deeply understood and broken apart.

In order to study the artifacts, I am going look at both the visual images and textual implications that rhetorically create an identity for women athletes. By looking at the poses and expressions of the women athletes, as well as the categories that stake claim in providing the reader with information on the athlete, a closer look at the performances of gender highlighted will give insight into the ways the media constructs identity for these women. If sports are declared a site to display extreme masculinity,

then how does that affect the way the media designs messages about female athletes? Does the media attempt to counter the normative ideals about sports, in order to promote a feminine identity for women athletes? The focus on the duality between masculinity vs. femininity, whether the athletes are positioned as the subject vs. object, if photographs are posed vs. emotional/action, content filled with personal descriptors vs. athletic descriptors, as well as the importance and meanings that come from the framing and ordering of text and visual images will contribute to the analysis of the complication and fragmentation in female identity.

PLAN OF STUDY

In the wake of women athletes reaching unparalleled success in the 1996 Olympics, many were optimistic that the media would appropriately mirror the positive changes taking place in the playing arenas. Fink & Kensicki (2002) analyzed the content and visual images of both *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* articles from 1997 to 1999 to see if any changes had occurred in a traditionally “male-centered” magazine, as well as a “female-specific” sports magazine. From the work of Fink & Kensicki (2002), the components that will be used to help clarify and analyze the photographs are: athletic action (including person(s) actively engaging in a sport and dressed in athletic apparel), dressed but posed and pretty (including person(s) dressed in athletic apparel but posed for the photograph; not engaged in athletic activity), a non-sport setting (including person(s) dressed in non-athletic apparel and photographed in a non-athletic setting), and/or sexually suggestive (including person(s) dressed provocatively or photographed in such a way as to focus solely on sexual attributes or

framed on body parts) (p. 325). In terms of content, the criteria studied will focus on Fink & Kensicki's (2002) descriptions regarding: personal (including non-athletic portion of a person(s) life), sport related (including ability as an athlete or accomplishments), system critique (including critiquing a sporting/societal institution), sport struggle (including difficulties of a sport achieving popularity or content describing mismanagement or poor behavior of athletes, such as continued low awareness of sport), and/or sport victories (including the rise of a sport achieving popularity or good behavior of athletes) (p. 325-326).

These components imply further meaning into questions that contribute to the rhetorical space that creates identity for female athletes. In what ways do photographs strategically invite readers to engage the text by the meanings that are expressed? What implications are made in the visual images about the players, as a female, and as an athlete? In what ways do these representations trivialize athletic accomplishment and in what ways does it celebrate team and the essence of team sport? What text and visuals are used that characterize masculine behavior and actions, as well as push to portray femininity and heterosexuality? The importance of how these various categories work, rest, not only in their presence or absence in the articles, but the order in which descriptors are placed, the amount of focus placed on the respective categories, and the main focus of the text and visual as a whole.

In this study, my largest concern is to gain neutral representation across national media sources. I will narrow down the media sources to two publications, one sport and one non-sport magazine. In order to achieve a sense of balanced representation, it is not only the "sporting world" that I intend to scrutinize, but also the information

disseminated to those who read and hear of these women through a source that represents various aspects of nation and worldwide news.

The non-sport magazine chosen is *U.S. News & World Report*. This publication represents one of the most recognizable and popular magazine sources that reach the broadest base of an audience across the nation. By looking at a magazine that is not tailored primarily towards athletics, it will be possible to see what information about these women athletes is deemed most important. The Media Distribution Services database found this publication to be one of the three most highly circulated news magazines in the nation. The survey was last conducted in 2003, and covers all print and broadcast media in North America in accordance with both the Audit Bureau of Circulation and Business Publications Audits. *U.S. News and World Report* ranks third in readership, spreading to 2,018,621. This magazine was also the most aptly available throughout the entire range of years to be studied.

In selecting the sport magazine, the most recognizable, widely circulated and tradition-bound sport print media is *Sports Illustrated*. A part of our national culture, this magazine embodies the essence of “need to know” information about the culture of athletics. The greatest form of purchase is through subscription, and the magazine itself creates an identity for readers, whereby a sports fan is marked. Not only do readers feel privileged into the “sporting world,” but also in touch with the lives, exploits, and achievements that they gain through their sporting experience from the magazine. As recently as December 31, 2004, the Audit Bureau of Circulation reported that *Sports Illustrated* is the most widely circulated magazine, reaching 3,324,631 people.

The U.S. National team was first assembled in 1985 with the entrance into the 1985 Olympic Festival. I will begin tracking coverage in the six media sources to find each article on the team that spans from one month prior to the Festival until one month following the 2004 Olympic gold medal victory. Along with the previous theory and components that have been introduced for analysis, the focus will be placed on the changes in the amount of coverage, type of coverage, and the impact that those two aspects have on the creation of female identity.

The following chapter will review the previous literature on the topic, focusing on the areas of: sport as a male domain, the notion of “gender-appropriate” sports, athletic achievement trivialization, heterosexuality in female athletics, masculine/feminine duality, and gender fluidity. The third chapter will be the analysis of the magazine articles collected to break down the changes in the amount of representation for the U.S. women’s soccer team over the twenty-year period, as well as the changes in the type and content of coverage surrounding these female soccer players. The conclusion, limitations, and suggestions for future research will comprise the fourth and final chapter of the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GROWTH OF FEMALE ATHLETES

The women athletes represented on the cover of magazines, newspapers, and on television did not turn into national role models without a change in the way culture viewed the role of sports in female lives. Looking specifically at the women's soccer teams of the inaugural World Cup Championship and Olympic gold winners, this group is part of the first generation that, at an early age, had the resources, training, and social acceptance needed to excel at their chosen sport (Smith, 1998). In addition to the foundation of athletic ability, it has been the media representations that have created rhetorical space for female athletes to assert skill and confidence, setting precedence in the way that women may be viewed, admired, and understood. In beginning to understand the nature of how this topic can be studied, a few important facts must first be put forth.

To begin with, the wave of change that has occurred over the past few decades, and particularly the last, has been mentioned. But, it was at the 1996 Olympic Games that the arrival of women was not only felt in the hearts of the athletes, but also in the media, spectators, and participants alike. The Olympics are the one major sporting event that draws women viewers in equal numbers to men. It was at the XXXVI Olympiad in 1996, that one of the most prestigious, recognizable sporting events was touted as the "Gender Equity Olympics." With NBC's prime time weighted to women's events, male viewership increased eleven percent for these games in Atlanta over the Barcelona Games in 1992 (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). Media focus was not only equaled, but

participation made great strides as well. With the recent addition of softball and the inclusion of women in water polo, wrestling and other sports, the 2004 Olympics had more events open to women than ever before. In terms of individuals competing, 2004 saw a staggering leap in female participants worldwide, with women representing 44% of all Olympic athletes.

But it is not only the Olympics that have marked changes in national attention. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, attendance at NCAA Division I women's basketball in the 2004 season was 4.16 million--up from 1.15 million in 1981-82--with men filling just under half the seats. An ongoing ABC Sports series on women athletes--*Passion to Play*--is watched by as many men ages 18 to 34 as women. According to www.espn.com, male viewers of women's college basketball and women's pro golf of ESPN comprise 10 percent more of the total audience than five years ago.

One of the most prevalent sites contributing to the construction of gender identity is the world of athletics. In the past few decades, the growth of women's sports has been tremendous, but greater importance rests on the formulations of female identity, which filter into the social world as a whole. Christopherson, Janning & McConnell (2002) express that "sport provides a microcosmic representation of society, reflecting contradictory and paradoxical messages about the roles of women that are transmitted into other societal institutions" (p. 170). While athletics may act as a mirror to larger society, the media proliferation of these messages and perceived "realities" act as the gateway to reaching the public. Through television, radio, magazine, newspapers, and the Internet, the American society is hit with constant subjection to the way media frame how the public perceives reality (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, &

Hardin, 2002). Messner (1988) pointedly remarks, “A person viewing an athletic event on television has the illusionary impression of immediacy—of being there as it happens” (p. 204). This sense of realism is in fact created through the media’s choices and filtering of information, which makes the public recipients, rather than spectators, of the event (Messner, 1988). A closer look into the socialization of media messages in forming identity and perceptions of female athletes took off in the years following the 1972 introduction of Title IX.

Attributed to the likes of the women’s postwar movement into the labor force and a revived feminist movement, the swell of female sports participation led to a push for equity in the athletic arena (Messner, 1988). Title IX established itself as the legal benchmark for equal rights among gender within sports, but took time to reach impacts that resembled equality. A mandate that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, Title IX stands against, as Greendorfer (1998) states, “the ideological construction of gender difference as gender hierarchy” (p. 82). The institution of sport has been cited as a critical component to the socialization of men making claims of biological superiority as a way to naturalize positions of social power over women (Greendorfer, 1998). The stake of biological difference is an issue that becomes nearly impossible to argue when put on the playing field, but has been imprinted into social conscience as differences that translate outside of the athletic arena as well. As Kane (1996) suggests, sport has always been seen as a way in which the biological and physical differences between sexes interact with traditional expectations of gender norms. “Sport reproduces the ideology of male supremacy because it acts as a constant and glorified reminder that males are biologically, and thus inherently superior to females” (Kane, 1996, p. 96). This

perception of physical and athletic superiority becomes linked to social superiority, consequently reflected in the amount of coverage depicted in the media.

THE MASS MEDIA

Kane (1988) suggests that “the mass media has become one of the most powerful institutions for shaping values and attitudes in modern culture” (pp. 88-89). The most widespread and fundamental experience of sport by society is gained through the dissemination of media sources; therefore, the selections by the media of what images, implications, and descriptions of athletes and their sport are represented become a reader’s reality (Kay, 1999). The acceptance of media into our lives has been naturalized. The ideologies and hegemonic structure are created and sustained in the overriding messages depicted so that the information we receive and ways in which we see the media feel real. Even if the sports media appears to serve the interest of the athlete or public, in reality, it still serves those who are in control of the media outlet. The bottom line is that decisions are made based on what sells, not always what is morally or ethically right in making changes to better include all members of society. In that sense, the media outlets push the agenda of those in power by giving the public what they’ve been normalized to desire. Groups are underrepresented and misrepresented in the media due to the structures of privilege and power that are present in our society, but the questions become, have the patterns for coverage changed over the past decade and a half, and in what ways have they changed? What the media portrays as important essentially becomes what is most valued to society. In a world in which athletics is portrayed as the gateway to breaking down boundaries of inequalities, the historical truth

of sports media is that women have been vastly underrepresented, and often times, represented in a manner different than men.

In a study conducted by Ganz & Wenner (1991) looking at gender differences in audiences experience with the sport media, emphasis was placed on the social norms, expectations, and responsibilities as contributing factors for variation. Although stated as starting to change, males have traditionally been encouraged to exhibit assertiveness, dominance, and competitiveness on and off the court or playing field (Ganz & Wenner, 1991). This behavior has long been acceptable for men and is cited as a major reason for the social success and ownership the male gender stakes claim to in our society.

Competitive girls and women have traditionally been seen to receive caution rather than support for these characteristics, playing a role in the implication of what is “acceptable behavior” in all facets of life achievements and goals (Ganz & Wenner, 1991).

Greendorfer (1998) points to sport as one of the most basic cultural productions in manifesting tangible gender difference. Basing “natural evidence” in a physically dominant gender order, the hierarchical set of superiority versus inferiority, strength versus weakness, and aggression versus grace are socialized into constructions of masculine and feminine gender behavior (Greendorfer, 1998).

A number of sport media scholars argue that certain viewpoints, frames, and values are privileged by the media at the expense, or exclusion, of others (Kane, 1996). The power of the media as a site for reinforcing dominant ideologies offers sport as symbolic representations of social order and the roles that masculinity and femininity play in society. But, continued success of women’s sports has sparked change. It is

critical to reexamine the movements in variation and development, rather than rest on the notion that today's differences in coverage mirror those from a decade ago.

FEMALE COVERAGE IN THE MEDIA

The proliferation of athletic coverage in the media is daunting, but the hunt for gender equality in representation is a battle that is far from being won. The focus, though, must be put on the degrees of change, as well as the types of coverage. But, as we look towards the coverage women are receiving from the sports media, great inequities are present. Studies show that women athletes, to begin with, have been found to receive less coverage than male counterparts (Clasen, 2001; Cunningham, 2003; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Kane, 1988). Claims are also made that this trend of inequitable coverage does not seem to be changing. In a 1990 analysis by Duncan and Sayaovong, *Sports Illustrated for Kids* represented male athletes in photographs that greatly outnumbered those of female athletes. A more recent study that researched advertisements in *Sports Illustrated for Kids* showed that males were represented as the more prominent model twelve times more than females (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998).

A majority of the literature on the topic echoes the belief that not only do women receive less coverage than that of men, but when they do gain exposure, it is most often portrayed in a stereotypical manner (Cunningham, 2003; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Salwen & Wood, 1994). For example, many researchers have found that the female athletes competing in sports deemed as "sex-appropriate," such as gymnastics or figure-skating, get much better coverage, in terms of length and number of features, than

do those who are participating in sports such as body building or wrestling (Clasen, 2001; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Salwen & Wood, 1994).

In addition, it is noted that in many cases, body image and femininity plays a major role in media coverage, and the women who are more physically attractive and portray the feminine athletic image that the media and public are looking for tend to receive a greater amount of the coverage (Cunningham, 2003). Following societal ideology, women are expected to try and fulfill sex categories by striving for cultural ideals, such as physical beauty. Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell (2002) analyzed the relationship between sport and gender order in society, claiming that women would be more acceptably viewed as using sport for the purposes of pleasure, participation, and to look and feel good. Additionally, Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell (2002) reestablish that the ideological framework of masculinity is associated with aggression and violence, while women's sports tend to emphasize graceful body movements and noncontact competition to emphasize femininity. An existing argument is that the media reproduces the dominant images of gender by reminding the audience that "despite their involvement in sports, they are still real women" (Whannel, 1992, p. 127). A study done by Salwen & Wood (1994), examining the covers of *Sports Illustrated* from the 1950's to 1980's, confirmed previous findings of the amount of coverage of females versus males, but also that females will be more likely than males to be depicted in stereotypical, traditional poses. It was shown that when the female athletes did appear, they were less likely than the males to be in active poses, or showing great emotion on their face (Salwen & Wood, 1994).

The suggestion has been that the depictions and coverage of women athletes in the media is to maintain an image of femininity at all times. Researchers indicate a concern for the effects that media has in this push for femininity. A common belief is held that in order to move women's sports into a more highly commercialized format, the media have actually further emphasized the "feminine" aspects of the athletes (Clasen, 2001). The paradox that exists for female athletes is that in traditional Western culture, "female" is defined as "feminine," while "athlete" is defined as "masculine" (Clasen, 2001, p. 38). Cirksena and Cuklanz (1992) suggest that the only solution is to push towards a rejection of binary dualisms and for a conceptualization where both components can be accepted, valued, and understood in a multifaceted way of thinking (p. 37).

SPORT AS A MALE DOMAIN

One prominent finding that stands as a significant part of much of the recent literature on female sport coverage is the notion that male athletes and teams receive a greater amount of publicity than female athletes and teams (Knight & Giuliano, 2003; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002; Curry, Arriagada & Cornwell, 2002; Weiller & Higgs, 1999; Kay, 1999; Kane, 1996; Woodcock, 1995; Salwen & Wood, 1994). Duncan (1993) notes that as long as gender equivalent tournaments and competitions are labeled specifically as "Women's," for example the "Women's World Cup" as opposed to the "World Cup," male events remain established as the standard, while the language insinuates female events as the "other" or secondary.

For example, Weiller & Higgs (1999) found that gender marking filled the discussion of the LPGA and Du Maurier golf tours, whereby the viewers were constantly reminded that they were watching a ladies tournament. When the athletes excelled, it was found that the women were only compared to the likes of successful men of the game, rather than any other woman athlete (Weiller & Higgs, 1999). This product of socialization was discussed by Greendorfer (1998) as a complementary process in which the dominance of sport focuses on the strength of the body and masculinity, leaving the female body as the “other,” or inferior, weak, and subordinate (p. 80). The media perpetuates this image by linking these contrasting messages of superiority and inferiority, or strength and weakness, with prioritized gender differences and preference in sport (Greendorfer, 1998; Kane, 1996).

Messner, Carlisle, Duncan, & Wachs (1996) contribute to this notion of a male standard in sport, stating that a female focused interview is not only a rarity, but comments become focused on the occurrences and events currently taking place within male athletics while interviewing the females. They argue that the media actively constructs a perception for the audience to see men’s events as a “dramatic, historic event that they simply must watch,” while fans are likely to see the women’s events as a “nonevent or, at best, as just another game” (Messner, Carlisle, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996, p. 435). Weiller & Higgs (1999) pin the abundant use of personal information in women’s reporting as a strategy to enhance the dramatic context of the sporting events by creating an “interesting” story. This belief suggests the athletic event itself does not hold the same intrinsic interest as a male sporting competition (Weiller & Higgs, 1999).

Felshin (1974) accurately predicted that as more women would be given attention for

their abilities, the reproduction of gender ideologies would persist. Due to the entertainment purpose of the sports media, women's athletics is pushed into a more highly commercialized format because of a belief in the need to further emphasize the "feminine" aspects of the athletes to gain acceptance. In a study on the 1999 Women's US World Cup team, Christopherson, Janning & McConnell (2002) concluded that the push for presentation of the games as a new era for women's empowerment essentially intended to "appeal to the hopes of women while perhaps assuring the men that nothing has really changed" (p. 184). These ideas contribute to the traditionally accepted phenomenon of sport as a male domain, preserved for the likes of masculine qualities to be unleashed (Messner, 1988; Hilliard, 1984).

FEMALES IN "GENDER-APPROPRIATE" SPORTS

The participation and interest of female athletics is at an all-time high, but studies suggest the representations that the mass media chooses to represent follow a pattern more parallel to the inequities between males and females in all avenues of society (Cunningham, 2003; Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Duncan & Messner, 2000; Daddario, 1998; Kane 1996). Duncan & Messner (2000), found that these differences are not decreasing over time, as a longitudinal analysis showed that the amount and type of broadcast media coverage of women's sport has not changed since 1989. Representations of the "feminine" athlete have been reported as the mainstream message sent through the sports media regarding an anxiety towards change and a need to maintain hegemonic ideals (Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002; Kane, 1996).

Duncan & Brummett (1993) believed the media representations filtered from the social sanctions that discouraged female participation in team, high contact sports, and pushed for “sex-appropriate” sport participation, those that were individual sports requiring grace and precision. Inequities are seen to start at an early age, whereby young girls are socialized into certain kinds of sports, such as tennis, gymnastics, volleyball, or swimming rather than soccer, hockey, or basketball. Once reaching adulthood, the socialization that started from various sources are transformed into an argument of physical “reality” and difference as an explanation into why women are not as accepted into some sports as much as others (Duncan & Brummett, 1993). The perpetuation of media depictions showing women in traditionally “accepted” sports further imprints the hegemonic ideals of gender into social conscience.

The commentary on women’s sports is said to use language that deemphasizes strength and power to neutralize the combative nature of the sport, while maintaining a level of femininity (Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002). Action photographs of female athletes participating in their contact sports were found underrepresented in lieu of shots that showed the “feminine” athlete posed (Woodcock, 1995; Messner, 1988). In examining photographs of female Olympic athletes, Duncan & Messner (2002) found the shots to be suggestive, focused on the women’s bodies, or portraits that are in contexts outside of athletics. Sports that are non-contact and traditionally more “feminine” are said to be a priority in media coverage. While progress has been made, Fink & Kensicki’s (2002) study of *Sports Illustrated* reported women are still underrepresented and were more likely shown in “sex-appropriate” sports, such as tennis, gymnastics, or golf, or in non-sport photographs.

Specific studies on the 1996 Olympic Games as a whole claimed that while the billing of the “Gender Equity Olympics” seemed prevalent throughout media coverage, hopes for equality between the men’s and women’s coverage fell short (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002; Eastman & Billings, 1999; Jones et al., 1999; Tuggle & Owen, 1999; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999). The individual sports and those, which “do not require a good amount of physical contact,” received the most extensive coverage (Tuggle & Owen, 1999). Daddario (1998) wrote that the female athletes were still depicted by such stereotypical traits as grace and beauty. Billings, Halone & Denham’s (2002) findings revealed significant differences in male and female reporting. Female athletes garnered descriptors of positive consonance, personality, looks and appearance, and background with implications that these qualities related to the overall “success” of their performances (Billings, Halone & Denham, 2002).

ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENT TRIVIALIZATION

Past research claims that in many instances, the accomplishments and achievements of women athletes often fall second-rate to information about the personal lives and feminine characteristics of the athletes (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002; Weiller & Higgs, 1999; Messner, Carlisle, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). These contrasting representations place the women in a feminine light first, athletically second, while the males’ coverage can focus almost entirely on the athletic achievements alone (Knight & Giuliano, 2003). Furthermore, focus on qualities and circumstances not related to sport or competition is seen as trivializing the athletic performances and once again reaffirming the arena of sport as a male domain (Fink &

Kensicki, 2002; Daddario, 1998; Kinnick, 1998; Salwen & Wood, 1994). Weiller & Higgs (1999) performed a comparative study on the media representations of men's and women's golf and found that when personal information was given about women, it related to factors such as marital status, clothing attire, or appearance. With men, findings showed that personal information was focused on the college the athlete attended, and accolades or honors received, such as "All-American" status. Jones et al. (1999) concluded that the print media's coverage of the female athletes during the 1996 and 1998 Olympic Games focused the greatest amount of attention on information unrelated to the athletic event, rather than on the achievements of the female athletes. Furthermore, this study found that comments suggestively reinforced female stereotypes. A contradiction arises while looking, not at the most recent studies, but one during the steady rise of women's sports participation in the 1980's. Messner (1988) speculated that society had begun moving into an era where female athletes gained a level of respect and legitimacy that overcame media marginalization and trivialization. His belief was that media attempts to inadequately portray the women as athletes would reflect poorly on the outlet, not on female athletics. Furthermore, Messner (1988) suggested that the coverage of women athletes during the late '80's was increasingly objective and did not trivialize athletic achievements, nor focus on a woman's femininity. This contradictory finding against much of the literature coming later in the 1990's and early 2000's interestingly supports Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin's (2002) claim that the gender inequity gap had widened, rather than narrowed after the 1996 Olympic Games. This literature claim will be further explored in my study that covers media representation from the beginning of women's professional soccer until today.

HETEROSEXUALITY IN FEMALE ATHLETICS

In regards to depicting femininity, much of the literature claims that the mainstream notion evading the media in regards to athletics proves to be an issue that essentially does not even relate to sports at all: sexuality. Female athletics has increasingly become more accepted within society, but an “image problem” continues to be debated. The literature regarding the representation of women athletes in the media often points to findings that it is the media who takes on the responsibility of “rightfully” depicting women in ways that continue to “fulfill” their sex categories (Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell, 2002; Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002). In order to follow the accepted values and beliefs of the mainstream culture, studies suggest that the sport media looks to heterosexualize females in the media, oftentimes at the expense of a lack of reporting on the actual athletic performance itself (Knight & Giuliano, 2003). While personal relationships, lives, and even looks are said to stand at the forefront of female athletic news, this same line of media portrayals is deemed unnecessary with male coverage. There is seen to be an underlying fear in society that the participation in athletics by females will encourage homosexuality.

The term “feminine apologetic” is frequently used in describing the ways that both female athletes and the media showcase traditionally “feminine” behavior off the field to “make up” for their “masculine” behavior on the field (Knight & Giuliano, 2003; Clasen, 2001; Rohrbaugh, 1979; Gerber et. al., 1974). Rohrbaugh (1979) describes the feminine apologetic as the attempt to bridge the gap between cultural expectations of femininity and the requirements for athletic excellence deemed “unfeminine” by society.

In addition, a general finding in research claims that the media looks to counterbalance these perceptions by showing the ways in which women athletes act traditionally feminine off the field by showing photographs and giving insights into their outside, heterosexual life (Kane, 1996).

Pirinen (1997) expressed this concept following the U.S. Women's soccer team's first World Cup win in 1991, by citing an article from *People* magazine, where very few action shots of the players were used, but rather those which include husbands, boyfriends, and children. This pattern following hegemonic heterosexuality was concluded as one of the main forces launching this group into even greater acceptance and privilege in the sporting world due to their perception as heterosexual, feminine women athletes (Pirinen, 1997). The question, though, can be raised as to what weight was placed on the target audience and intended readership of *People* magazine, a media source which is based on content of a closer look into the lives of "people," not a celebration of athletic achievements.

In Knight & Giuliano's (2003) study of the effects of media portrayals on people's perceptions of male and female athletes, they found that both male and female athletes described as clearly heterosexual were perceived much more favorably than were athletes with an ambiguous sexual orientation. Through the response data from fictitious newspaper profiles, Knight & Giuliano (2003) concluded that participants only feel there is too much focus on an athlete's personal life when the athlete is possibly referring to a same-sex partner, whereas the pattern is not found when the athlete refers to a heterosexual spouse.

Salwen & Wood's (1994) research on the media's attempt to maintain a representation of femininity for women athletes pointed to an example of tennis star, Chris Evert, the poster-girl for women's athletics of the eighties. On the August 28, 1989, cover of *Sports Illustrated*, Evert epitomized the family theme with her photograph from the waist up, racket slung over her shoulder, and wedding ring notably displayed. The caption of the cover read, "I'm going to be a full-time wife." Salwen & Wood (1994) believed that the internalization and socialization of these messages by the media is oftentimes far-reaching towards the American public, and since then, the structure has given way to little, if no change at all. Mason (1992) points to the verbal commentaries in televised women's body building in which the questions posed were intended to focus on the concerns perceived as most important in the minds of the viewers. For example, insights were given as to whether 'X' athlete is a mother despite her muscularity, or if athlete 'Y' has a boyfriend (Mason, 1992). These aspects have no pertinence to the competitions themselves, but display more positive representations of the females through the eyes of the media and the intended audience.

While it is noted that homosexuality is rarely openly discussed in the media, an athlete's sexuality may often be used to contrast against another's homosexuality. As already stated, United States tennis player, Chris Evert, was more often shown to the public through emphasis on her relationships with men than on her tennis achievements. These depictions were displayed while being pitted against the Eastern-European lesbian, Martina Navratilova, who was constantly described as masculine (Kane, 1996). The words hetero- and homosexual were never overtly spoken, yet the messages from the media were clearly read by the public.

In Christopherson, Janning & McConnell's (2002) study on the 1999 Women's World Cup team, they reinforced that when hegemonically masculine characteristics are portrayed in women athletes, there is most notably a balance in references to the ways in which the individual reinforces, not only feminine characteristics, but many times heterosexuality. They claimed this overwhelming support for a new era of woman by the media stemmed from the fact that most of the members fit the societal norms of race, class, and sexual identity (Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002). While societal talk seems infused with promise at the gains in media attention afforded to women after the 1990's, literature points to the conclusion that the gender inequity gap has not narrowed and gender stereotypes continue to be perpetuated (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002; Kinnick, 1998).

MASCULINE/FEMININE DUALITY

Messner (1988) acknowledged the dynamic tension between what stands as traditional prescriptions for femininity and the image presented by athletic, muscular women. Messner, Carlisle, Duncan, & Wachs (1996) claimed that in most cases, a woman athlete's skills are rarely discussed without additional reference to her femaleness. The sexualization of female athletes and highlighting of the physical and sexual differences between women and men contributes to what Christopherson, Janning & McConnell (2002) called the dichotomy of dissimilarity. Willis (1994) stated that "to succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman, because she has, in certain symbolic ways, become a man" (p. 36). Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin (2002) focused on the media attention placed on women athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Kids* in the three years

following the 1996 Olympics, claiming that the “socializing agent” role of the media makes the greatest impression on children. Findings showed men vastly outnumbered women in photographs, as well as males being more often depicted in team sports, active poses, leadership roles, and strength sports than were women athletes (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin (2002). Fink & Kensicki (2002) conducted a content analysis on the articles and photographs within *Sports Illustrated* from 1997-1999 in another post-1996 Olympic Games study to find that female athletes continued to be represented in “stereotypical and traditional conceptions of femininity that supercede their athletic ability” (p. 317).

The media has been cited as perpetuating the hegemonic ideal of gender by proving to an audience that regardless of athletic involvement, the women are feminine at heart. The content and visual constructions are seen as insinuation that the media’s emphasis on social roles, feminine appearance, and feminine behaviors translate into the suggestion that there is greater value and desire in being a “feminine” woman and mother, than the embodiment of a champion athlete.

But, as of late, research has begun to address findings of duality in the representations of female athletes in the media. A majority of previous research points towards the glorification of femininity in women’s sports, while some discussion sheds light on the concept of both masculine and feminine description and expression. Clasen (2001) feels that marking strict dualisms in sex and gender limits the experiences of both sides. When putting men and women on opposite ends of the dichotomy, women are seemingly left out of the sporting world because femininity is not characteristically part of athletics (Clasen, 2001). Clasen (2001) pushes for the realization that the

masculine/feminine dualism does not need to lead to rigid role expectations for men and women.

Christopherson, Janning & McConnell (2002) discussed a sense of dualism on the subject of the 1999 Women's World Cup team by implying that the athleticism and more traditionally masculine qualities of the particular group of women were contributing factors in the team's "sexual attractiveness" and thus popularity. The findings suggested that young girls look up to the women because of their "muscular, athletic, tough, and gritty" exterior, but feminine qualities were spotlighted to show a juxtaposition of both images in order to promote "gender equity" (Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, p. 180, 2002). Christopherson, Janning & McConnell (2002) directly examined the media discourse in newspaper coverage from the 1999 Women's World Cup Championship and found that the US women athletes were framed in stereotypically feminine ways, with contradictions of masculinity included. This group of researchers argued, though, that the media packaged the 1999 Women's World Cup team as a "new type of woman, in new era in society," but the overriding message was structured to minimize the impact of the group's success on the status of women in contemporary American society (Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002). Their research suggested a problematic contradiction in female athletics due to the "value system" present in American society. The argument was based on the background that feminine characteristics in sport and the contradiction of women's role in society do not hold the same value and status as men. Therefore, Christopherson, Janning & McConnell (2002) find that exhibiting dualism in media coverage is disempowering for women because the representations of the heterosexual attractive female lessens the respect as an athlete and those of qualities of

athleticism “contradict” what it means to be a female (p. 183). While noting the apparent dualisms present in media coverage, Christopherson, Janning & McConnell (2002) believed the 1999 media coverage perpetuated a combination of feminine and masculine contradictions that partially undermined the popularity of the team. During my analysis, I will argue a different perspective on this finding.

Helstein (2003) takes a contrasting approach in a study on the representations of women athletes in Nike advertisements targeting female consumers. Findings showed that attributes associated with what constitutes a female athlete could be found in knowledge, power, and truth. The theme of emancipation is discussed in terms of women striving for excellence and liberating one’s self from the confines of political and cultural conditions (Helstein, 2003). Helstein (2003) claims that desire to be the women athletes we see portrayed in the media becomes a popularized notion in today’s acceptance of women’s sports. The power to normalize images of what signifies female athletes can be found in the social superiority of Nike as an entity (Helstein, 2003). Additionally, while some studies on the effects of the 1996 Olympic Games still remain skeptical, Cole (2000) celebrates the achievements of women as a glorious era of representing true progress for female athletics. The concept of these women acting as role models and celebrating feminism as competing at the highest levels in sports is found to be “hopeful and encouraging” for the opportunities that exist in the future (Cole, 2000). The efforts on the push for women’s sports, though, are stated by Cole (2000) as potentially undermining the everyday struggles of ordinary women because of the celebrity feminism behind athletics. But, with sports and the media being such influential forces in

our society, I see a high priority in studying the representation of female athletes in the media because of the trickle down effect it has on the “ordinary” women of our society.

Research into why distinctions must be made when women behave competitively on the field and feminine off the field is important in searching for the capability to free one’s self of gender labels (Lynn, Hardin, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002). As Bourdieu (2001) explains, female athletes are caught in a ‘double bind.’ If they play and participate as men would, then they risk losing the perception of holding feminine attributes and their feminine ‘sense of self.’ If they choose to behave like women, they may appear incapable or unfit for the job (game), while contributing to the opinions of the natural right of men to positions of power (Bourdieu, p. 67-68). Trethewey (1999) argues the same point regarding a “double-bind” for professional women in organizations. This dualism concept of gender caused her to raise the question as to how women can “learn to navigate one’s body (and behaviors) through these complex, ambiguous, and precarious ‘in-betweens?’” (Trethewey, 1999, p. 425).

GENDER FLUIDITY

Butler (1990) acknowledges the “performance” of gender and questions the category that has been placed on “woman.” She feels the presumed universality of the subject of feminism limits the capacity for women to act because it inherently includes and excludes, much like the problem of hegemonic masculinity (Trujillo, 1991). One does not “become” a woman intrinsically through sex, but rather a female is under “cultural compulsion” to act in ways appropriate for a woman (Butler, 1990). Butler (1990) points to the problem that a person is seen as one’s own gender to the extent they

are not acting as the other (p. 22). Butler stated, “No longer believable as an interior ‘truth’ of dispositions and identity, sex will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification...one that...can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings” (p. 33). Gender fluidity in the context Butler proposes can move beyond the rigid frame of masculine and feminine towards an interplay of gender identity. According to Clasen (2001), an athlete must be seen as an athlete without connotations of masculinity and femininity. Butler (1990) feels that femininity is “undermined by the constraints of representational discourse in which it functions” (p. 4). The suggestion of “woman” as multiple and discontinuous, rather than a static, universal self exhibits the very notion of women athletes in the media. Butler (1990) challenges gender in stating that it is no more than a form of drag in which we make choices in each situation as to what identity and characteristics will be “performed” in displaying gender norms. This leads to a number of significant research issues relevant to my study such as what stereotypic masculine or feminine qualities does the media depict in the women athletes and how do media representations of the athletes impact identity creation as women when a duality of gender is portrayed?

Theory on women in athletics and the advancements that have been made cannot be discussed without looking at the ideas of Kenneth Gergen’s (1991) “postmodern self.” Gergen’s (1991) beliefs stem from the concept that there are so many levels to life, we create multiple “selves” and self-conceptions, whereby the expectations that are created in different situations often bring about socially constructed performances. We can constantly recreate the characteristics that make up our “performances.” Agreeing with the likes of Goffman (1959), Bulter (1990), and West & Zimmerman (1987), Gergen

(1991) pushes the notion that we are always performing and would claim that these women own a pastiche personality, in which they are able to rid themselves of possessing a unified self, and use athletics as one of the many forms of self expression. While the athletes such as Mia Hamm, Brandi Chastain, or others may be highlighted due to specific accomplishments, their membership to the US Women's National Team renders the largest sense of identity through what Gergen (1991) would call the "relational self." Through the experiences the team shares together, both the athletes themselves, and the ways that they are represented in the media create identity through the interactions with one another and the notion of an "us." The stories, emotions, and relationships are constructed through and with teammates as one fragment of self, just as the interactions with a partner, family, or religion constitute another part of one's identity.

Athletics holds societal ideals of a masculine construct, and West & Zimmerman (1987) say that we are always "doing gender" in transactions, and performing in ways that attempt to accomplish the cultural expectations that are placed upon sex in terms of behavioral aspects. West & Zimmerman (1987) state, "Gender is not merely something that happens in the nooks and crannies of interaction...and not interfering with the serious business of life...it does not seem plausible to say that we have the option of being seen by others as female or male" (p. 130). Gender display is an ongoing activity that fills everyday interaction, whereby value is placed on "proper" ways of behaving that maintain "gender identities" as shaped by societal influence (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 142). Their belief is that the body is merely a site that allows for meanings to be imposed. In this way, the concept of sharing both masculine and feminine characteristics

can be further studied in order to understand the creation of a female athlete's identity as it is represented in the media.

Duncan & Brummett (1993) challenge a large portion of studies on the sports media in the literature's "corollary assumption that the texts of sport media are both deterministic and univocal: deterministic, because it is assumed that texts influence people more than people influence the meanings of the texts, and univocal, because it is assumed that texts have single (in this case, pernicious) meanings" (p 58). Duncan & Brummett (1993) do not abide by the notion that human beings are socialized into their experience of sport, but feel that if the media text does in fact trivialize, overlook, or stereotype women as much as other literature claims, an explanation cannot be made as to how members of the marginalized group are capable of participating in athletics at all. The assumption made by much of the literature on the subject is that the audience internalizes the values and beliefs, however disempowering, promoted by the sports medium (Duncan & Brummett, 1993).

Furthermore, Duncan & Brummett (1993) found that spectators of sports texts, especially women, used viewings as a way to empower themselves. Personal empowerment relies on awareness that as individuals, we act as both receptors and agents (Duncan & Brummett, 1993). It is not only the mediated message that can act upon us, but we hold the agency to create our own understandings. As women's sports advances along with the place and status of women in society, individuals control their own view and perspective on the implications of dualism in media representations. The ideas of Duncan & Brummett (1993) empower both the female athletes and audience by

recognizing a celebratory theme in behavior and living as an aggressor in the human race, rather than strict notions of gender labels.

From these foundations of theory, I will go on to analyze my understanding of the magazine articles covering the Women's U.S. soccer team over the past two decades.

While an overwhelming suggestion in past literature points to the inequitable and undesirable coverage of women athletes in the media, a reexamination of exactly how sport is portrayed as a male domain and in what ways feminine characteristics are highlighted to trivialize athletic achievement needs to occur. The ability to assert my perspective through the base of gender fluidity may point to intricacies not noted in analysis that purely looks separately at masculine and feminine descriptions. An analysis already becomes biased if mention of femininity is seen as implying trivialization of athleticism. The opportunity to strengthen a human's capacity to take on the duality of both masculine and feminine tendencies, rather than viewing sport as a way to divide gender characteristics, is an invaluable part of the celebration for women in athletics. The order of information, focus of the article, and logic behind what information is given plays a role in the way texts may be interpreted. For this reason, Duncan & Brummett's (1993) belief that people have agency in determining the message from articles, as well as texts holding more than one meaning opens the door for a new look at the ways in which gender duality creates a positive identity for female athletes.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN ATHLETES IN THE US MEDIA

Ultimately the coverage of the US Women's National soccer team significantly improved since their inaugural 1991 World Cup victory and steadily increased into the '90's. In the growing amount of coverage, a parallel is visible between the greater quantities afforded to women's athletics as directly linked to the successes experienced by the group, as well as the successes of their female counterparts. Evidence in the content and quantity of these articles confirmed that being a "woman," does not necessarily mean always displaying a fixed, universal sense of self in order to be accepted in society. A woman no longer had to enact only overtly feminine attributes at all times. The performances of gender, whether it is feminine or masculine characteristics, when enacted by these women, are seen to gain popularity and approval in both the media and society, based on the circumstances subscribed. It is important to remember that through increased visibility of women in the sports media, the continual acknowledgement of the changes constitute the notion that while pushing towards equality, females within the athletic arena are still the "marked" gender, performing within a male-oriented field. While gender bias can still be found in reporting, a concept is gaining ground which suggests that women can be multifaceted in the gender identities of one's self. Women can overcome what was previously perceived as a "lose-lose" situation for female athletes, explained as being caught in a double-bind. It takes the understanding that performing various identities through the media builds the foundation for new cultural ideals, acceptance and expectations for a woman's multifaceted self.

CULTURAL GENDER ROLES: late 1980's-early 1990's

Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell (2002) identified the ways in which the types of audience a given media outlet intended to reach played a large role in the types of sports and images that were portrayed. The media is seen to promote competitive sports and depictions of performances of aggression and power as masculine, contrasting pleasure and participation images as feminine. Analysis of *Sports Illustrated* issues during the time of the inaugural US Women's World Cup victory in 1991, uncovered not even one page on the major athletic accomplishment, but the sports and stories this media outlet chose to represent in the coverage of women were turned to strictly non-contact sports. In the weeks prior to, during, and after the World Cup of 1991, the two women's sports that were covered were women's tennis and women's gymnastics. From the previous review of literature, this follows the findings that female athletes competing in sports deemed as "sex-appropriate," such as gymnastics or figure-skating, get much better coverage, in terms of length and number of features, than do those who are participating in contact sports (Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Kane, 1988). The gymnasts of the U.S. women's national team were depicted in Panasonic advertisements, while the professional women tennis players were the only females to be represented in the text of the print news. But, these women were playing the role of fulfilling their sex categories. While tip-toeing the line of acceptance in sports participation, the pictures and articles of both tennis players and gymnasts depicted fit, feminine athletes who still played the cultural role assigned.

The stories about these women athletes fit under the category of mainly personal descriptors, highlighting issues that related to the personal lives and character of the athletes, rather than the actual sporting events themselves. The athletes did not clearly depict the competitive attitudes embodied through the women's soccer articles of the late '90's and early 2000, but rather a desire for the fun of participation. A three page article entitle "Truth or Where?" covered the outrageous press conference Monica Seles's press agent constructed to dramatize her return to tennis after injury (Jenkins, "Truth or Where?" 7/29/1991, p. 34-35). The focus was on the three-ring press conference and Seles's antics, not her tennis performance. The other highlighted article focused on a Monica Seles-Martina Navratilova match, but even more so, the controversy of Navratilova's experience as a lesbian woman, and her feelings on the announcement of Magic Johnson contracting the AIDS virus (Jenkins, "Salvos at the Garden," 12/2/1991, p. 58). In short, these earlier articles within the sports media support the previous research on the media's representations of women athletes in a feminine, personal light first, and athletically second (Knight & Giuliano, 2003).

INVISIBILITY: early 90's

Much like the lack of coverage on the World Cup victory of 1991 in *Sports Illustrated*, the mainstream news of *U.S. News & World Report* effectively overlooked the efforts of the women in the early 1990's, reporting on the women's team for the first time in a full article in 1995. But, mention of the U.S. women's team occurred in a December 1993 article discussing the rising interest in the sport termed as "the other

football.” Specifically, the article states, “Few American sports fans share such passion for ‘the other football,’ but the 1994 World Cup finals are about to change all that” (Zimmerman, “20: Will America Catch Soccer Fever?” 12/27/1993, p. 73). This systemic critique of the institution of soccer in America and how it differs in the level of passion that is seen around the world indicates that, while on the rise, soccer is not a sport that is embedded into the tradition and psyche of our nation’s love of athletics. A turning point for the sport was cast on the men’s 1994 World Cup that took place in the United States for the first time in history, as the article suggests that the U.S. team needs to advance in the games if interest is to grow. A statement of comparison citing the success of the women’s team followed the explanation of what tremendous talent the world has to offer: “But America’s women already have claimed a world soccer championship, and U.S. soccer officials are hoping against the odds that the men will be next” (Zimmerman, “20: Will America Catch Soccer Fever?” 12/27/1993, p. 73). In this statement, while seemingly inconsequential, Duncan & Brummett (1993) suggest that a reader has the agency to understand it in a variety of ways, particularly by the use of the word “but” in the beginning of the sentence. For example, the use of the preposition “but,” can suggest to a reader that if the women can claim a world soccer championship, so too should the men. This can be looked at as both a positive or negative on the women’s team. First, it can be a sign of respect, that this group of females set the stage and laid the groundwork for success for the United States. Or on the other hand, it could be understood that certainly the men of the United States should be able to equal or accomplish anything that a women’s team can achieve. Wisely, Duncan & Brummett (1993) point out that sentences or words can be taken in a variety of ways, but it is not always what is

explicitly typed or spoken, but the way it is understood by the reader. In the following paragraph, I will explain further.

A common trend found in the articles on the women's team is found in comparisons made against the male athletes or teams. Taking one approach, the sentence above may imply that because the US women's team was able to claim a World Cup championship, so too should the US men based on common preconceived notions of gender inequality in athleticism. In another light, though, the reference to the success of women's soccer following a description of "soccer fever as a growing epidemic," gives credit to the U.S. women's team leading the way, or at least pulling a large portion of the weight in shaping a growing interest for the game of soccer in the United States. Varying from the traditional process of notable contact sports, where a women's game gains popularity through building off of the men's game, the excitement growing around the game of soccer becomes attributable to the groundwork laid by this group of women. This description of a sport victory in the article can be viewed as inherently celebrating women earning steps to build soccer through athletic achievement. As reported, the early 1990's did little in the way of moving towards any equality in the amounts of coverage on the US women's soccer team, but this article in *U.S. News & World Report* can be viewed as bolstering the respect of the women as athletes.

QUANTITY OF COVERAGE

Progressing into the mid-1990s, this group made steps towards a change in the quantity of coverage, but through analysis of the following articles, it is clear that the stress of sports media, controlled primarily by males, clearly values competitiveness as a

foundation to the coverage and appeal to sports itself. Barring the fact that a complete lack of coverage preceded and followed the 1991 World Cup win, the first articles devoted entirely to the women's team arrived in both media sources of my study in June of 1995 to preview the World Cup. While *Sports Illustrated* highlighted the success of Michelle Akers in the 1991 World Cup, *U.S. News & World Report* marked this group as the "dream team" of all sporting teams. This label reads clearly as a celebration and glorification of the women as athletes, making no mark on them being a dream team of all "women's" teams, but rather sports as a whole (Schrof, "American Women: Getting Their Kicks", 6/19/1995, p. 74). The build-up of this tournament in the two magazines was not followed with further coverage, very possibly due to the lack of success experienced by the US women's team. This presence and absence of information and reporting on the Women's World Cup exemplifies the attitude and desire of our nation's sports media system, whereby press is often more influenced by quality performance and success than by gender, race, sexual preference, or any other characteristic. As women's sport continued to gain greater acceptance, the celebratory stories and highlights began to arrive when the team earned respect and admiration through performance on the field. In gaining media popularity for a sport that struggles to find its place in society, this phenomenon is evidenced by the acceptance and growth of the US women's soccer team at an even greater rate than that of the men's soccer team.

At the '96 Olympic gold medal win, momentum increased and more coverage was seen in weeks prior, during, and after the victory, contributing to the concept of the rise of popularity in the media coming through both greater acceptance, and particularly great success. While *Sports Illustrated* turned the corner in the sporting society more quickly

due to the women's wins, *U.S. News & World Report* saw a rise in coverage, but not to the same capacity as the sports print media. It is important to bear in mind that this source represents information to the greater society, one that may be more accustomed to culturally relating masculine gender identity to athletics. But, in each year, recognition and understanding of women's place, not only as sport participants, but sport competitors grew, in turn, increasing the quantity of articles and column-inches about the team.

The '99 World Cup win can be pinpointed as the pinnacle of media attention for the women's soccer team, filling the *Sports Illustrated* issues four weeks prior, during, and following the event. *U.S. News & World Report* stayed a few steps behind, reporting on the celebrity status of Mia Hamm as a reason to watch the games, but followed with coverage on the changes occurring in the sport and social culture due to the unparalleled achievements and popularity of the team. While it was the same team and sport, the 2000 Olympic Games led to a plateau or slight decrease in the quantity of women's soccer coverage, but women's basketball, handball, swimming, track, and beach volleyball filled the pages, rather than the previous golf, tennis, and gymnastics of the early '90's. This display of greater coverage on traditionally "sex-inappropriate" sports places the Women's National soccer team as the team that seemingly spring boarded competitive women's sports into higher cultural acceptance and appeal. Additionally, the expectations the US women's soccer team had set for themselves and the public through past achievements left a pathway for media coverage to fall short. There is no escaping the fact that while interest and popularity continued to grow, women's soccer does not hold the rank and appeal for less than die-hard fans to follow the numerous international opponents and the level of competition the US would be facing. Therefore, falling short

of a gold medal did not tarnish respect for what the women had accomplished, but may have led to a story that ultimately was not newsworthy to the American public.

The second gold medal win and retirement of the five core players in 2004 sparked articles previewing, updating, and following the Games in *Sports Illustrated*, but the wins of '96 and '99 garnered slightly more coverage during that time period. *U.S. News & World Report* lacked the amount of press that was apparent at the turn of the century as well, but increasingly referenced the US women's team and individuals in shorter articles that focus on the sport, as well as other national issues. While it seems counterintuitive that the continued growth of success matched a leveling off or slight drop in the quantity of coverage by 2004, the US women's softball team, named the greatest of all-time, also shared a great deal of the spotlight. To look at the coverage of women's sports in general, it exploded. The US women's soccer and softball teams may have headlined the Games, but increased, and in some cases, unprecedented coverage of swimming, basketball, women weight lifters, platform divers, water polo, handball, and gymnastics also filled the pages of these media outlets. Increased quantity marked a new day for women's coverage as well as the female athletic faces that were depicted. Images showed smiles, grunts, and emotion-filled action shots, displaying the many facets of what a woman can be while contradicting the conclusions of previous literature findings that state the push to only cover feminine, non-action poses. While in my study, the quantity of women's soccer coverage slightly declines, the overall support of female athletics can be marked as a sport victory in that a greater amount of press was afforded to women's sports on a whole, as more teams were finding success and earning the spotlight.

GAINING VISIBILITY: mid-late 1990's

One of the most important aspects for the battle in gaining equality for an underrepresented minority is to first gain visibility. Concepts such as hegemony and ideology deal with the normalized, taken for granted assumptions embedded into our everyday actions and thoughts of which society may not be fully aware. The World Cup win of 1991 did not change the fact that women's soccer remained at a level of invisibility of which most were not even aware at the time. There was not coverage immediately following the victory, just as there was no coverage prior to the game. But in retrospect, it is evident that the victory paved a path for later changes in media coverage in the late '90's, which I will show you in the following paragraphs. It is important to realize that even without media coverage, the success of this same group of women which began with the 1991 World Cup, is what afforded women a voice and the opportunity to speak and acknowledge gender inequities and differences in the latter part of the decade.

As further analysis of the *US News & World Report* articles show, a majority of the pieces from this time period remain informative, making reference and acknowledgements to the women's team not as inferior, but as a "marked group." By the term "marked," I mean that while the success and excitement for the US women's soccer team was celebrated and highlighted, each article made it clear that this, in fact, was a "women's" team. In most cases, the label of female created even more prestige when accomplishments were made in the sports arena because the notion that women could find such success in athletics was not yet a natural part of the mindset of society. It was not just discussion on soccer, but rather "women's" soccer. Even so, it was the increased

media coverage which opened up rhetorical space wherein the athletes now had a forum to push for gender equality in sport. The ability of using their success as leverage to push for equality came from the visibility provided by the sports media.

For example, the background and foundation of this team was not forgotten by the players, nor was it forgotten by the media outlets. The embrace of who these players were as athletes, but also as women was portrayed but the fight that was shown in the victory of 1991. The lack of visibility that existed in '91 became the focal point of how the tide was turned for women's athletics. A common storyline of the mid-90's began much like this: "Four years ago, the scrappy bunch of college-age pioneers emerged from obscurity to shock the world, winning the inaugural Women's World Cup over nations that have ruled soccer—at least men's soccer—forever" (Schrof, "American Women: Getting Their Kicks", 6/19/1995, p. 74).

In this statement, a variety of rhetorical moves take place in both promoting the promise of what these women have accomplished, while subtly showing that the traditional focus of the sports and media world unconsciously defaults towards that of men's athletics. The mindset as we understand levels of competition place the measuring stick, even for women, by the standard of male athletics. But, this description also aptly talks of these women as coming up in the ranks of respect. A description of a sporting victory, this group takes on the go-getter image of "scrappy pioneers," further exemplifying movement in the fight to take a place in sports media by recognizing previous "obscurity" and invisibility.

In this same article, reference to Title IX informatively talked about the boost of interest felt by young women in the United States, due to the newfound opportunities present at the college level.

“A boom in youth soccer leagues during the 1970s fostered a nation full of young women eager to play college soccer just when federal law mandated that starting in 1978 college athletics should treat male and female students equally. As a result, while the rest of the world, even soccer-crazed countries like Brazil, continued mostly to ignore female soccer players, the United States began building an empire” (Schrof, “American Women: Getting Their Kicks”, 6/19/1995, p. 74).

A system critique of old and new, these few sentences discount some previous notions and assumptions of girls lacking a desire and interest in athletics. This provides evidence of a societal change that helped spur a sporting victory for women’s soccer and women athletes as a whole by merely adding descriptors such as “fostered” these “eager” young women. Furthermore, the claim that the United States has built “an empire” in women’s soccer gives way to the global impact and overriding respect made by this group before even taking stage at the 1996 Olympics.

In accordance with the subject of the 1996 Olympic Games, the influence of the media speaks volumes as to guiding the public with the perspective and attitude that should be taken on a given issue. But with the respect shown by *US News & World Report*, the intent of pushing the seriousness of the U.S. women’s soccer team also shed light on the obvious fact that this experience for women was new, and the exposure, unprecedented. The differentiation of male and female still remained a topic of conversation but clear support for the growth of the game was expressed.

“Women's soccer could get the boost it needs from next year's Atlanta Olympics, where it will debut as a medal sport, giving the national team a chance to show off in front of huge American crowds. The U.S. Soccer Federation is taking the opportunity seriously, putting \$2 million into a full-time training facility in Florida, where players will live and train for the next year and for the first time receive salaries ranging from around \$25,000 to \$40,000” (Schrof, “American Women: Getting Their Kicks”, 6/19/1995, p. 74).

Clarity and an informative nature on the state of women's soccer characterized the pieces in *US News & World Report*, but both similarities and differences to *US News & World Report* could be found in *Sports Illustrated* at this time. While a lack of coverage existed prior to the 1996 Olympic Games, the success of the women's soccer team launched excitement for the game of soccer, along with visibility for all of women's athletics to be celebrated as well.

The inaugural Olympic gold for US women's soccer in 1996 was one piece to the puzzle in touting the XXXVI Olympiad as the “Gender Equity Olympics” (McCallum & O'Brien, “Women's Games,” 8/12/1996, p. 42). Even though success did advance coverage of women athletes, the media implications regarding these female athletes also pushed the image of athletes continuing to perform their “proper” sex category. This coverage during the '96 Games exemplifies both categories of a sport victory as well as an indirect system critique. By this I mean, the Women's Games were put at the forefront of much of the media as a platform was created due to the success of the women's team. The media coverage was plentiful and this marked a place of achievement by both increased coverage for women's sports and the way these teams

were placed in such a positive light. But at the same time, much of the description of these women athletes and teams stressed the characteristics of femininity. It was the success that grabbed media spotlight but the media still followed the social system and expectations for the women to be more gracious and friendly in these competitions. This can be witnessed in the following excerpt, whereby clear cut comparative descriptions of females versus males points to societal expectations of behaviors typically associated with gendered labels. “When we look back on the Atlanta Olympics, we’ll remember...the smiling teamwork of the kinder, gentler women’s Dream Team more than the guns-out assault of the NBA All-Stars” (McCallum & O’Brien, “Women’s Games,” 8/12/1996, p. 42).

Immediately, personal descriptors such as “the teamwork of the kinder, gentler” women, as opposed to “the guns-assault” of the men paint a picture of both teams “doing gender” and performing the proper sex categories that are culturally assigned. In that same 1996 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, a second article on the women’s soccer team proclaimed the inaugural US gold as an athletic achievement, but even more significant, a step forward for future female athletes. It was noted that from this ’96 gold medal, interest in women’s soccer grew along with celebration for the sport. These claims on flourishing popularity deriving from the athletic achievements of the team fall into the categorical evaluation of a sport victory. The acknowledgement of women’s games and women athletes in the media sends a bold claim that the direction of female athletics in terms of quantity of coverage, positive portrayals, and even the success expected in US women’s sports, was on an incline.

Gergen (1991) claims that self-identity is constructed through interaction and comparison with others. He believes that a large part of our identity is created and understood through those we associate and are associated with. Gergen's (1991) concept of the relation self is easily applied to the way identity is created for a woman athlete in terms of the connections she holds on the team and with her teammates. Sports have traditionally been placed in the realm of masculine identity. Due to the inconsistency of women's reporting, legends of the past and sports celebrities of today are often the men who we see in the papers, magazines, and on television time and again. But, in the effort to show just how worthy of praise and media attention these female athletes are, many of the immediate highlights fall towards comparisons of the woman to male athletic greats such as, "...but Mia's something special. I compare her to Barry Sanders" (Farber, "Score One for Women," 8/12/1996, p. 76).

While the statement is a compliment, the question becomes, why is it when searching to display the greatness of an athlete, must we justify a woman's place by relating her to the likes of a male? Does that come from little knowledge of previous female athletes due to a lack of coverage, or is it perceived as a sign of "respect" to bestow masculine qualities in the arena of sports?

For example, [Michelle] Akers was said to take on the "poise of Joe Montana" (Whiteside, "World beater," 6/5/1995, p. 74), as well as being "...called 'the Michael Jordan of women's soccer,' but unless (you are) a rabid soccer fan, you probably haven't heard of her" (Whiteside, "World beater," 6/5/1995, p. 73). This statement in *Sports Illustrated* supports the belief of Duncan & Brummett (1993) that different individuals can often understand articles and texts in different ways. As Duncan & Brummett (1993)

challenged the concept of texts being univocal, this comparison of Akers and Hamm to famous male athletes can be interpreted by readers in a variety of ways and be taken as either complimentary or trivializing towards the female athletes. This statement also provides a system critique on the coverage of female athletics. It is a systemic critique of women's sports coverage that invites the growth of rhetorical space wherein conversations about gender inequity can take place comes with the statement 'you probably haven't heard of her,' because it shows acknowledgement for lack of knowledge and notoriety in the women's game.

The article goes further to explain the unbelievable nature of Akers accomplishments by using raw numbers: "...82 goals in 87 international games, a ratio believed to be unmatched in women's or men's competition. By comparison, the U.S men's all-time leading scorer, Bruce Murray, had 21 goals in 93 international appearances...Imagine Michael Jordan leading the NBA in scoring while playing only 24 minutes a game" (Whiteside, "World beater," 6/5/1995, p. 74). This statement can also be taken in a variety ways. While some researchers may point to the comparison as being a criticism of female athletes, this text, written by a journalist in *Sports Illustrated* could merely be giving way to the lack of knowledge about the actual game of soccer in the United States. In order to articulate the magnitude of this accomplishment to all readers, the journalist chooses to use the more universal terms of basketball, assuming that would be better understood by the general sports population.

On initial analysis, these comparisons, while respectful in nature, imply that the sheer numbers of Akers goal to game ratio are not enough, but it is necessary to construct a masculine image that garners as much revelry as Akers deserves. It is important to

remember these statements ultimately come from the '95 article in *Sports Illustrated*, which was merely the stepping stone to reaching the level of exposure that came through success and time. For this reason alone, if you need to express the greatness of the best woman player of the time because no one is familiar with her achievements and skills, where else can you turn, but to an athletic icon like Michael Jordan. As time has passed and the spread of media attention on women's sports has grown, the future may hold statements that relate young players to Akers, Hamm, and the rest of the group.

On the same celebratory note, *US News & World Report* portrayed the two women's teams of the 1996 Olympics, both soccer and basketball, as already finding their rightful place in the societal sporting picture. Mixed into an article that discusses other women's sports and minimally covered men's sports, a blanket statement implies that these two teams have sufficiently made their mark among society's athletic elite. "The success of pioneer teams in women's soccer and women's basketball has changed the fate of today's players, who now have professional leagues to join and shoe contracts galore" (Schrof & Mallory, "Seeking Olympic Lucre," 8/12/1996, p. 76).

Comparing the *US News & World Report* articles to the *Sports Illustrated* pieces both written in 1996, *US News & World Report* shows a perception of women's athletics to be a step ahead in the race of equality and stability in the sports media market and athletic industry in general, as opposed to *Sports Illustrated*. In the *US News & World Report* article celebrating the notion of "changing the fate of today's players," as well as quantifying endorsements as "shoe contracts galore," this primary source is not only talking about a growth of coverage, fan base, and the allure of women's sports in general, but putting these women in a place that differentiates from that of *Sports Illustrated*.

Sports Illustrated glorifies the advancements and fight for women's equality while *US News & World Report* describes a scenario that fits into the category of sport victory, which places the money and celebrity of women athletes already on par to the men. While it is true that in only five years, parallel success by ultimately the same group of women resulted in unparalleled publicity; the mere fact that so much attention of the *Sports Illustrated* article, "Women's Games," revolves around women's athletic coverage also shows how women remain the marked category in our society. Changes occurring both on the field and in the media fall target to critique, both positive and negative, on the effect it has on cultural attitudes and societal acceptance. You will see in the following example how the coverage creates rhetorical space for the women to speak on their struggles and challenges in earning respect as the marked gender in athletics. My study looks only at *Sports Illustrated* and *US News & World Report*, which may accentuate the women athletes performing their gender roles, but do not look down upon it. But, as you will see in a comment such as Joy Fawcett's that follows, these women still find that adjustment of cultural attitudes continues to be a work in process. The invisibility of women caused a stir, and the visibility of women resulted in celebration. Of course increased coverage is desired, and the acknowledgement of more coverage is necessary, a part of the female athlete's identity that is displayed and spoken shows an acknowledgment of the need for change.

For example, Joy Fawcett stated, "I hope that [my daughter] has more opportunities [in athletics] and finds it a lot easier than I did. If she chooses this sport and gets to this level, there should be much more recognition," (Farber, "Score One for Women's Soccer," 8/12/1996, p. 72). A member of the U.S. women's soccer team herself, Fawcett

gives an insider's analysis and critique of the experience of women's athletics as having low awareness and references the struggle to claim a place in the culture of athletics, calling for change. While Fawcett expresses discontent of the current and past situation, a step that moves towards reaching improvement in coverage comes first through public awareness and openness on the topic of inequalities. This statement is critical to counterbalancing the media efforts of commemorating the 1996 Olympics as belonging to the women athletes, by challenging the distance remaining in gender equitable treatment.

The interesting twist in making this women's soccer team the gateway sport to growing women's athletics in the media also lies in the fact that the low awareness and struggle is not just based on their aspect of gender, but also the low popularity in general, of the sport soccer, as compared to other sports in the United States.

In an effort to promote Men's Major League Soccer, a marketing tactic was to not only look at how to attract more men to watch, read about, and follow the league, but also to target women to take a greater interest in becoming fans, due to the stronghold that the women's team already had on the American public. "To tap into the girls' market, MLS is licensing products not often associated with professional sports, like hair scrunchies and barrettes" (Toch & Mulrine, "Soccer, American Style," 10/28/1996, p. 71). Further discussion in the article, as well as a mockery of the feminine product "hair scrunchies" in the title, has dual implications. The article itself gives respect to the achievements of the women's team and claims that these achievements will bolster the popularity of the league due to an overall perception of soccer success in the United States regardless of

which team it comes from. But, a clear emphasis is placed on femininity and professional sports as being incompatible.

A systemic critique that is made within this same *US News & World Report* article suggests that the newfound popularity and media attention being received by the women's national soccer team mainly exists because of the on field victories. This critique goes further to say that Americans have an inherent quality of competitiveness that is often times placed above many other characteristics valued in society. This next excerpt attributes a large part of United States interest to the simple concept of winning, more than characteristics of gender or sport. "...the U.S. women's team's No. 1 world ranking, have been invaluable to the league... 'Americans don't want to be interested in something they aren't good at,' says Hunt, the legendary sports entrepreneur who runs MLS franchises in two cities" (Toch & Mulrine, "Soccer, American Style," 10/28/1996, p. 71).

Cunningham (2003) is one of many scholars who believe that body image and femininity play a major role in the amount of media coverage a female athlete receives. He claims that the women who are more physically attractive and portray the feminine athletic image that the media and public are looking for tend to receive a greater amount of the coverage. Following the societal ideologies, women are expected to try and fulfill sex categories by striving for cultural ideals, such as physical beauty. This phenomenon of legitimating behaviors by producing a picture of naturalized notions of gender is a topic that is acknowledged by the athletes, and explicitly stated in the media.

"Then there's 'the Anna Kournikova syndrome,' as Chastain puts it. 'If you're not the most beautiful player or if you don't have a million-dollar smile or if you're not 5'11"

and a model size, then even when you do good things, you have to do double,' Chastain says" (Wahl, "Run of the Millie," 9/25/2000, p. 58). This critique creates dual implications. Not only does it acknowledge that the female athletes are aware of tendencies by the media, but by this statement being present in the media article itself allows the readers to understand the identity of these women is not to gain media attention, but celebrate their achievements in sport. Butler (1990) would applaud both Chastain and *Sports Illustrated* for challenging the naturalized notions of gender that support the idealized, unified feminine identity that push to keep fictions of gender in place and cause "Gender Trouble." While this issue, as Chastain terms it, 'the Anna Kournikova syndrome,' is one that is often brought to light and critiqued in scholarly literature, the presence of the statement in the print media is liberating because the argument is in the primary source itself.

In a similar vein, an article in *US News & World Report* presents an argument as to what attracts the media to particular players, teams, or events. In this piece, the highlight is on the Olympic Games wherein readers and even scholars must take into account the incredible amount of athleticism and success that exists in such a concentrated amount of time and space. "Yet after the winners climb down from the podium, a complex mix of fate and savvy determines what comes next...The difference between stardom and the shadows lies not so much in an athlete's performance as it does in other factors like the sport's prominence, its marketing potential, the athlete's charisma and the drama embedded in his or her biography" (Schrof & Mallory, "Seeking Olympic Lucre," 8/12/1996, p. 76). This statement, pointed at no particular sport, team, or even gender, is a clear system critique of the U.S. sports media. While a reader has the agency to either

agree or disagree, this source is setting out specific guidelines as to what may catapult one team or athlete ahead of the rest. Additionally, this article gives reasons for why some athletes, regardless of any gender bias, may receive more media attention based on other biases. As stated, the sport, an athlete's personality, or their story, may bring more spotlight than the mere categories we've been looking at of male versus female. In the media as with many other outlets of the entertainment industry, choices and decisions are based on dollars and cents.

But, just as Duncan and Brummett (1993) refer to the agency of a reader in how each individual may create different assumptions from the same text, it is possible to dig deeper into the categories created by Schrof and Mallory. Further analysis can be made about the factors that impact marketing potential and the characteristics of self that might be seen as charismatic. Finally, it is important to examine how gender may have an impact on the way those questions are answered. With that being said, this group of women on the US soccer team, may have had the marketing potential, charisma, and story to achieve media stardom, but it was the combination of this with their celebrated success that launched the sport of soccer into increased prominence and visibility.

ANIMAL DESCRIPTORS

Throughout the years of coverage leading to 2004, images of the female athletes overwhelmingly showed action, collisions, and fierce faces emulating the desire to perform a role fitting, not to gender ideals, but the circumstance and situation at hand. While the action and competition was still displayed in the early to mid-'90's, abandonment of "gender-appropriate" pictures led to a more accurate depiction of the

roles and performances these athletes took on the field. For example, an image of emotion by a US player garnered the heading, "...got a roar from young lion Abby Wambach" (Wahl, "Going out with a bang," 8/30/2004, p. 64). Her emotions expressed in words, the description clearly illustrates an action by Wambach that does not follow a feminine gender performance, yet in the moment of competition, this animalistic behavior is celebrated by teammates and the media alike.

In a very endearing and complimentary manner, an article in *US News & World Report* that shows reverence towards the retirement of a soccer legend. "But the woman known among players as Mufasa, the patriarch in the movie *Lion King*, won't be remembered just for willing herself to play" (Auster, "Soccer's Shooting Star," 9/4/2000, p. 68). This statement shows the fluidity of gender and personality, telling the tale of a female athlete who took on a patriarchal nickname and role to her team, yet has a number of reasons, such as her leadership and aggression, that make Wambach the player and teammate that she was. Similarly, excerpts from *Sports Illustrated* text show the same comparison of performing as an animal, a costume that is acceptable and desired in this form of competition regardless of gender.

It is not only the visual images that are evidence to the public that lines of masculine and feminine identity can coexist and fluctuate given the situation in which a woman athlete partakes. The liberation of having the uninhibited ability to simply perform inner fervor allows female athletes to purely "be," rather than consider the rigidity of socially constructed characteristics that label gender. The advancement of the media to utilize descriptors and expressions of animalistic nature in a positive

connotation empowers women to understand that this behavior is deemed as valiant and admirable.

For example, “Akers gave the defender a shove...She turns and gets hit, then turns again and gets hit again, then she claws her way through the pack...” (Whiteside, “World beater,” 6/5/1995, p. 74).

There is no description of grace or pleasure in the behaviors of Akers, as the performance takes on masculine characteristics, but through understanding of circumstantial fragments of identity, Akers can take on various roles. Milbrett is said to have no fear in “locking horns” to get the opportunity to face the best players in the world (Wahl, “Kicking Butt,” 7/5/1999, p. 59), while Brianna Scurry is compared to “freakish events,” said to be a “force of nature,” and “roams around the box with confidence, snuffing out crosses before the opposing team can even get off a shot” (Wahl, “She’s a Keeper,” 7/12/1999, p. 37). This comparison of taking on dog-like instincts and behaviors are admirable qualities based on the circumstance Scurry is in. While Scurry most likely would not want her performance of gender outside the field to be described in ways that implicate animalistic behaviors, this depiction of her goalkeeping tendencies is a clip worthy of posting in her locker. Going against traditional forms of femininity in athletics in the last decade takes on a different connotation than past literature suggests.

EXPRESSIONS OF DUALITY / GENDER FLUIDITY: 1999

While past research marks feminine personal descriptors of women athletes as subsequently disrespecting athletic abilities, the media can express the phenomenon of

gender fluidity by celebrating the accomplishments that come in women athletes being multifaceted humans, rather than adhering to strict gender labels. For example, a description of Joy Fawcett printed in only the second sentence of an article regarding the U.S. women's soccer gold medal read, "She had a gold medal around her neck and her two-year-old daughter Katelyn, in her arms" (Farber, "Score One for Women," 8/12/1996, p. 72). This personal descriptor, painting the picture of world class athlete and mother, shows the duality of gender, whereby Fawcett finds success in characteristically masculine and feminine roles of society. This highlights the sheer magnitude of what Fawcett values most in life, along with a clarifying the ability for both aspects of herself to successfully co-exist.

This same depiction comes in a *US News & World Report* article, highlighting both the success of Mia Hamm on the field, and pointing towards the changing role she may play in differing circumstances.

You can buy the book. You can wear the shoe. Now you can see her in action, starting Saturday. Mia Hamm, top scorer in the soccer world with 109 goals, will lead the U.S. team's pursuit of the 1999 Women's World Cup. Hamm, 27, the daughter of an Air Force colonel who moved around the world, is a modest hero. ("Washington Whispers: Mia Hamm; Lou Dobbs; Hillary Rodham Clinton; C. Everett Koop," 6/21/1999, p. 13) In just these few sentences, celebrated is her popularity in mainstream society through her athletic accomplishments, characteristic modesty, and also adaptability as a daughter. The mention of her role as a daughter does not trivialize what she has accomplished on the soccer field, but rather points to the complexity of the human being that she is. In that

same role, an article discussing the retirement of Michelle Akers relishes in the importance of her last contest.

“Her parents got plane tickets to Sydney to watch their soccer daughter, Michelle Akers, compete for Olympic gold” (Auster, “Soccer’s Shooting Star,” 9/4/2000, p. 68). This term of “soccer daughter” can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but talking of Akers parents permeates a pride and celebration for a child, indifferent to gender, fulfilling a societal role through athletics. In an age of celebrity and idolization, this statement also relates Akers to every young girl running around on soccer fields or in any other athletic event, allowing dreams and aspirations to become an attainable reality. Akers is not only one of the greatest women to ever play the game of soccer, but she, just like millions of other adoring fans, continues to “do gender” simply as a soccer daughter. One of the greatest portrayals of the unfixed state of gender performance came in the 1999 article previewing the Women’s World Cup. The focus of the article, “America’s Host,” is based on the flexibility of midfielder Julie Foudy’s master identity.

“...co-captain and team comedian, who will quarterback the US offense and almost certainly be the life of this three-week party...Who can excel for ESPN as a soccer analyst one day and for the national team the next. Who can throw elbows with the toughest opponents and blow kisses as a former high school homecoming queen. Who can win an Olympic gold medal and one month later nearly quit the sport to enter med school. Who can sign a deal to endorse a product and then visit a remote corner of Asia to observe the conditions under which it is made” (Wahl, “America’s Host,” 6/21/1999, p. 65).

The suggestion by Butler of “woman” as multiple and discontinuous, rather than a static, universal self is exhibited in this excerpt. The performances stated by Foudy though, cannot be limited to performing in simply masculine or feminine ways, and the continued use of separating those two categories in the study of analysis of sports media may be far too constricting for all circumstances. Clearly, on the field, behaviors such as throwing elbows can be categorized as moments of masculine gender performance, and blowing kisses suggest putting on the drag of an effeminate queen, marking Foudy with contrasting identities. But further analysis into the descriptions of personality and behavior leave a cloudy area in terms of how this woman is “doing gender.” Foudy takes on the identity of an athlete on the field, a wife at home, and a humanitarian in her work. The projection of these traits does not necessarily trivialize the accomplishments of the athlete (Mason, 1992), because these articles effectively identify the ways in which her success on the field is a critical component to who she is, regardless of whether it embodies what past notions of “woman” entail. These contrasting pictures express the fluidity of gender that creates an identity, which allows her to excel in various aspects of life. This portrayal also personifies Gergen’s (1991) description of the “postmodern self.” Suggestion of a fragmentation of personal characteristics shows a celebratory and liberating view of Foudy in an ability to live out multiple identities.

In accordance with the research by Duncan and Brummett (1993), this article on Foudy’s duality of identity exemplifies the nature of interpretation that can come from the media. While references to Foudy’s feminine characteristics, heterosexuality, and career path outside of athletics may fall under athletic trivialization in some studies, Duncan & Brummett (1993) highlight versatility of language in the messages that are

sent. Foudy's ability to successfully enact multiple identities expresses the strength exhibited by a woman finding social power on the foundation of athletics.

In *US News & World Report*, a critique on the changes in the ways society views what is accepted and what is even desired. Acknowledgement of a newfound advertising appeal does not point to necessarily feminine characteristics, but rather ones that may take more of an idealistic "athlete" and role model, surpassing a label of gender.

"Women athletes--those who kick and shove and pant and grunt--have not traditionally held a lot of advertising appeal. Sequined skating outfits were sexy, smelly shinguards were not. But the joyous athleticism of the women's team, their good-natured patience with fans, and their loyal support of each other has struck a deep chord across America, causing those who control advertising purse strings to take a second look" (Ackerman, "She Kicks. She Scores. She Sells," 7/26/1999, p. 78).

While analyzing these articles in terms of both athletic and personal descriptors, it becomes clear that understanding the desirable qualities of those sport celebrities that we find most apparent today, come as a multifaceted human being. It is not only fluidity of gender, but a message to society that admiration should come on the athletic field through victory and success, but increased media coverage also plays to those who can attract a social desirability. Previous research claims that content of social acceptance and interest for female athletes rested more in physical attributes and confirmation of sexual orientation (Cunningham, 2003; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Kay, 1999; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Kane, 1988). The press for the US Women's soccer team began to break down barriers of what it means to be an elite athlete and amiable media figure.

“No one can be sure where the phenomenon will go from here...more corporate sponsors...a professional soccer league...still more TV coverage. [Hudson of Anheuser-Busch] says it has a shot since "we've seen a lot more personalities coming forward" in the World Cup events” (Hammel & Mulrine, “They Got More Than Just Game,” 7/12/1999, p. 70).

In reference to these personalities, the article goes further to discuss the societal change in which these type of athletic personalities are more widely accepted by contrasting the athletic legend of the early-mid 1990’s, Babe Didrikson Zaharias. ...considered by many to be the best athlete of all time...She was a true celebrity, but along with adulation she faced accusations that she wasn't feminine enough, notes Mariah Burton Nelson, a former Stanford University basketball player... ‘It used to be you had to wear a skirt and not touch anyone else, stay on your own side of the net. Now you have big, strong sweaty women knocking each other down . . . and thrilling fans’. (Hammel & Mulrine, “They Got More Than Just Game,” 7/12/1999, p. 70)

In looking at this team, not only as breaking into the media in terms of coverage and gaining respect as both females and as athletes, the media also takes part in alluding to the ways in which they have acted as a gateway team for all women athletes.

“The women's team has more than just talent; they've got personality, too, which other sports (think of tennis's Venus Williams or Martina Hingis) are also benefiting from” (Hammel & Mulrine, “They Got More Than Just Game,” 7/12/1999, p. 70).

Clearly stated, it is through the popularity of these women and the increased attention they’ve brought to women’s sports, that has helped break the mold of media coverage for other female athletes as well. Through the evolution of this group of

athletes, women's soccer can more accurately be called the gateway sport to the socialized notions that we have on female athletics today. It is the brute force of a contact sport, combined with the charisma of these athletes as women that depict the multifaceted self. In looking at the contrast between sports descriptors and personal descriptors, this statement in the *US News & World Report* puts the reference to the team's athletic talent at the forefront, and follows with the added bonus of a winning personality. This ordering prioritizes the athletic ability of these women as well as celebrating the completeness of who they are as people.

In Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell's (2002) study, part of their categorization involves why people participate in sports. In accordance with previous notions, they suggest that women participate in sports with the main purpose as pleasure and exercise as opposed to the competitive nature of athletics, which they associated with males' purpose for participation. This aspect of my analysis argues against those findings. The abundance of athletic descriptions and emphasis on the importance of winning sharply contrasts the position that women have greater propensity for participating in sports for pleasure, enjoyment, and health benefits.

For example, an article in *US News & World Report* explains the overall purpose of the US women's team is to win. The sheer focus is on the competitive nature of the game, which would fall into the competition category Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell's (2002) reserved for males. A quote depicting this attitude was spoken by the national team coach, Tony DiCicco who said he "...fears his players can't keep winning through the rest of the century unless the United States supports the formation of elite leagues here" (Hammel & Mulrine, "They Got More Than Just Game," 7/12/1999, p. 70). This

explicitly states that the bottom line of this team and the focus for players, coaches, and those associated with the team is to be the very best in the world. It's not just for fun and to stay in shape, the purpose is to compete. Support for West & Zimmerman's (1987) notion of "doing gender" and performing different roles in relation to circumstances are present in these articles, pointing towards the change in societal gender norms when it comes to sport.

When showing reverence and celebration for Michelle Akers upon retirement, an article boasted, "Her shot and ball-control skills were unmatched. No one had her combination of strength and speed. And then there was her willingness, as her coach says, to 'put her head where someone kicked the ball'. (Auster, "Soccer's Shooting Star," 9/4/2000, p. 68)

The pure athletic descriptions as laid out by Fink & Kensicki (2002) are not only included when talking of the particular greats of the game, but the media supports statements of the popularity and sporting victory for the women's team through emphasis on these descriptors. For example, a male tailgater is quoted prior to a game saying,

Women's soccer is just better than men's. Quicker passes, more finesse. And, our women win. (Hammel & Mulrine, "They Got More Than Just Game," 7/12/1999, p. 70)

Statements and characteristic sporting victory descriptors often are validated by disproving the traditional belief that men do not choose to view women's athletics. The measuring stick of popularity and acceptance still is held by the quantity of viewers, as well as the makeup of who is watching the sports. With recognition of the conditional

characteristic that the ideals society hold regarding sport are still largely based on male opinion, these articles begin to prove the breakthrough.

A *US News & World Report* article cites the head of sports marketing at Foote, Cone & Belding in San Francisco, Keith Bruce, discussing the potential for players to collect million dollar endorsement deals and noting, "They got men to watch their game. Men never wanted to tune into women's sports before" (Ackerman, "She Kicks. She Scores. She Sells," 7/26/1999, p. 78).

Excitement for the sport and acknowledgement of the immense impact these women have on the youth of the country is also compounded with the versatility and range for which their popularity exists. This support that is articulated by the national media is a testament to the extent that acceptance has grown into celebration.

Reporting on a Women's World Cup soccer quarterfinal game that took place in Maryland, an article notes, "Legions of preteen 'mini-Mias' were out in force, wearing the jersey of the sport's biggest star...But cheering elbow to elbow with them in the stands, bare chested with 'You Goal, Girls!' painted on their backs, was a less touted but equally loyal group of fans: the guys" (Hammel & Mulrine, "They Got More Than Just Game," 7/12/1999, p. 70).

The references and descriptions of the growth of these women function to create rhetorical space for women athletes, and also women in general. Whether through the quotes of the athletes themselves or the thoughts and observations of the media, there is now a voice and place in the media to discuss and evaluate the state of women's athletics in society. While these statements of support shed a positive light on the support for the US women's soccer team, the rhetorical space allows for awareness on both the success

and challenges that have been and will be encountered. This is seen most clearly in the *US News & World Report* articles due to the fact that the focus of the magazine is on prevalent news as a whole, rather than a sport focus. Therefore, when discussed, it sheds light on the perspective and opinions that the general society, rather than just the sporting world, has on these multifaceted women. However, this does not leave out the focus that falls on sport and skill when it comes to discussing the success of these women and the impact they've made on the sport. A different article in the *US News & World Report* flatly and informatively critiqued the games of both men and women. "Aficionados argue that the women's game is more exciting than men's soccer. Women are more likely to have one-on-one confrontations, versus the long sweeping passes (and, say critics, less scintillating play) of the men..." (Hammel & Mulrine, "They Got More Than Just Game," 7/12/1999, p. 70). This statement categorically falls into description of skill and sport-related content, expressing an evaluative nature that leaves absent any discretion due to gender. The lack of marking on gender points to a substantial progress in the nature of coverage. What is reported is focused on the game itself, which is the direction desired.

In 2001, the magazine quipped that "the hottest ticket in town isn't to the White House or new Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle's gilded offices. It's to RFK Stadium to see Olympics star Mia Hamm and her new women's soccer team, the Washington Freedom." Further statements displayed the universality of the accomplishments achieved by this group in all aspects of our society, as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, "I think it's great to have them. I really wanted to be there to

cheer them on as a symbol of women breaking through" (Bedard, "Mia, Donna, Bill, and Hillary," 7/9/2001, p. 17).

During the period following the 2000 Olympic Games though, coverage still did not ignore the sporting struggle that was faced by the women. The inequality in pay for the females as compared to male athletes was reported in the context of being a factor that did not match the precluding statements regarding the sporting victory achieved in gaining awareness and popularity. An article discussing endorsements highlighted the money-making potential of the women, first comparing the US soccer team women to women athletes of the past, but then concluded with "...these hard-bodied women will still earn only a fraction of the income of popular male athletes" (Ackerman, "She Kicks. She Scores. She Sells," 7/26/1999, p. 78). This is evidence of the rhetorical space that allows for critique.

Additionally, in reference to a popular commercial of 2000 that featured athletic contests between Mia Hamm and Michael Jordan, choreographed to prove competitive equality, an article satirically states the struggle for this equality when it comes to dollars and cents.

Anything Mia can earn, Michael can earn better. And not just Michael. The average benchwarmer in basketball earns more in a game than the champions of women's soccer pocket in a season. So Mia Hamm and her teammates boycotted last week's Australia Cup--won by a second-string U.S. team of mostly college players--to negotiate new contracts with the United States Soccer Federation. (Robinson & Marcus, "Who's Got Game?" 1/24/2000, p. 21)

An insight that does not serve to celebrate the trend of income for professional athletes in terms of gender, this systemic critique does educate the public and moves toward discussion as to the immense imbalance between what top male and female athletes make financially. It is an issue that is still prevalent in more than just the athletic arena, the breakthrough of a critical rhetoric that acknowledges the inconsistency, shows that a once accepted and standard practice of our culture has begun to be questioned.

THE WOMEN LEAVING AS ATHLETES: A New Century

As time progressed and nearly a decade passed, this same example of the multiple gender enactment was seen in creating a lasting image that America and the rest of the world will take as five superstars of women's soccer walk away from the game. The '99, '00, and the first of '04 articles that stressed technique, aggression, strategy, and physicality slightly changed their tone. Understanding that circumstance creates instances of identity that call for particular types of gender performance, the ruggedness and animalistic nature of the women who ruled the field seemed to take on a different performance than what was stressed throughout articles during competition. For example, much of the literature points to any discussion and talk of personal indicators as undermining females as athletes. Fink & Kensicki (2002) analyzed the content and visual images of both *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* articles from 1997 to 1999 to see if any changes had occurred in a traditionally "male-centered" magazine, as well as a "female-specific" sports magazine. Fink and Kensicki (2002) use personal attributes as one of the categories that differentiate how men and women's coverage

differs. In their study, a personal attribute was seen as undermining a woman's worth as an athlete. But in this clip from *US News & World Report* from 2000, the personal descriptor shows reverence to the previous athletic accomplishments of Michelle Akers. What happens next...Akers wants to play in the women's pro league, but for now she'll retire to her farm and ride horses. She may even watch on TV as her 'buds' go for gold. 'I'm going to hate it,' she says. 'I keep waking up every morning thinking I have to go to battle. But I'm done'. (Auster, "Soccer's Shooting Star," 9/4/2000, p. 68)

These statements still point to the "battle" and to the grit that Akers endured as a player, yet expresses the complete nature of her as a person and what fulfills her life in all respects.

A *US News & World Report* article from 2003, interviewed 35 year old Brandi Chastain after the 2003 World Cup, displaying the continued multi-dimensional person that these women represent. When Chastain is asked what is next for her personal and athletic descriptions are combined in her response. However, it becomes clear that the role of athlete and focus on career has taken some precedence over that of a wife or mother.

Chastain responded, 'The Olympic Games [are next], hopefully. Having a family is something my husband and I are interested in. But I haven't actually given in to the idea that there won't be a league here'. (Benjamin, "Socking it to Women's Soccer," 9/29/2003, p. 78)

For a variety of reasons, this simple statement points to an equality of relationship and partnership between Chastain and her husband, as well as understanding the state of growth and struggle that the sport still faces. A further systemic critique within the

article discusses the struggle of the professional league whereby Chastain claims, “I don't think the league folding has a lot to do with soccer in the U.S. I think it has more to do with the fact that we're battling a really rough economy” (Benjamin, “Socking it to Women's Soccer,” 9/29/2003, p. 78).

Clearly a matter close to heart, this rhetorical space allows for these women to critique the lack of success experienced by the new league, pointing not to gender or popularity of sport, but rather external factors that many readers, unfamiliar with the complexity and nuances of professional sports, can begin to understand. In this sense, the media exposure is an avenue to speak about the struggles that come with being both an athlete and a wife, within the context of how both roles are affected by one another and how both roles can be desired within the same woman. The hope for a league to flourish is explained in terms that include societal and economical challenges, not just a focus on gender influences.

In this instance of the “Golden Oldies” article from *Sports Illustrated*, Kristine Lilly is remembered for her “elegant” corner kick, and Mia Hamm for “characteristic willingness” to do whatever the team needed to win (p. 51). It is stated that “Hamm will be free to start the family she wants with husband Nomar Garciaparra,” acknowledging that Hamm, after countless years of going against gender norms, can finally “fulfill” the cultural ideals expected of females in “doing gender.” A look back at the losses gave way to the description that these challenges “humanized them, revealing a grace in defeat” (Wahl, “Golden Oldies,” 9/6/2004, p. 51). The word choices used in this *Sports Illustrated* article perpetuate the notion of multiple identities for the woman athlete. Not only does the media display the emotion and fight that comes from success, but suggests

that “grace, elegance, and willingness” are all characteristics that are part of the gender performance of these women, in contrast to some of the images that are shown. As Butler (1990) refuted, there is no one unified category of “woman,” and in these articles, it is clear that descriptions that indicate femininity do not necessarily have to be contrasted against sport, but can be included as a part of identity. Describing these women as complex and multi-faceted came not only with descriptions that included their own persona outside of athletics, but also the components of self that came in accordance and comparison to others.

Identity can be formed and constructed due to situation and circumstance, as well as those who are participating in the interaction with us. While Mia Hamm, Brandy Chastain, or other players may be highlighted due to specific accomplishments, their membership to the US Women’s National Team renders the largest sense of identity through what Gergen (1991) would call the “relational self.” Through the experiences the team shares together, both the athletes themselves, and the ways that they are represented in the media create identity through the interactions with one another and the notion of an “us.” The stories, emotions, and relationships are constructed through and with teammates as one fragment of self, just as the interactions with a partner, family, or religion constitute another part of one’s identity.

As previously discussed, the media spotlights particular descriptions and behaviors of players, but in displaying the interactions, a sense of identity is created for the female athletes as well. To begin with, the notion of these women, being part of an entity greater than they could be on their own displays the nature of family and friendship with which many readers can relate. “Some of the players took the togetherness thing so

far that they even discussed getting tattoos to commemorate their Olympic achievement” (Farber, “Score One for Women,” 8/12/1996, p. 76). This statement in a *Sports Illustrated* article displays a level of enthusiasm for the accomplishments reached, but more importantly, shows that these women could just as easily be a college co-ed and her girlfriends on spring break. It is not only about the grit and the heat of the battle, but about the relationships and experiences that bring a group together. In this example, “...the team repaired to the Kappa Alpha Theta house off the Georgia campus for a party with friends and family. A sorority house was the perfect setting for a celebration by a group of women who had become sisters” (Farber, “Score One for Women,” 8/12/1996, p. 76). A strong representation of feminine identity is constructed in this excerpt.

Women who have never participated in athletics can understand why these events and why these women feel so passionate about what they are doing. For an outsider to perceive the activity as “only a game,” touching the heart of relationships, friendships, and sisterhood is a different angle to create an identity of these women as sisters to all. Rather than interpret this story as a media ploy that trivializes women as athletes, this story can also exhibit the intention of the media to narrow the gap between the reader and celebrity, making a connection as merely human to human. There is a celebration for the bond that can be shared because of femininity.

In the same light, Foucault claimed, “Whenever you talk with female athletes, there is a bond you share” (Wahl, “America’s Host,” 6/21/1999, p. 68). Suddenly, the strength of connection between masculinity and sport that proliferates literature on the sports media is broken down. Through the relation and interaction shown between women athletes, an identity for femininity in sport is built because of the understanding of

emotions, feelings, and passion that inherently come with sharing a unique identity with others like you.

Following the concept of the relational self, it is not only the notion of constructing identity with others, but also constructing identity through others. "...Hamm asked several teammates if they thought she was hurting the team. 'I told her, Mia we need you,' Scurry said afterward," (Farber, "Score One for Women," 8/12/1996, p. 76). This simple interaction reiterated by the media allows for readers to see the construction of identity for a generalized notion of women athletes. Arguably the greatest women soccer player ever, the initiation to this interaction by Hamm indicates selflessness, humbleness, and genuine concern for her team at the heart of who she is. While the media could simply put that Hamm is gutsy without ego, the ability to see her actions in relation to others allows a greater understanding of a part of her identity. Circumstantially stated, once returning to the field, those qualities are not lost, but the reason she is an icon comes from the ability to "aggressively and ferociously...tear apart defenses" (Wahl, "Going Out with a Bang," 8/30/2004, p. 64).

It is not only through teammates that a sense of self-identity can be constructed, but also through those who are depicted as caring about the group most. Although previous literature suggests sports continues to stake claim in masculine identity, the depictions of fans and their reactions towards these women promote the message that even though females in sport remained the "marked breed," their identity as respected athletes comes from the views of others as well.

It was not only the player's families who recognized their potential, but it was also the "little girl named Lindsay who had sent US players homemade red-white-and-blue

twill anklets and bracelets, and every schoolgirl who had written to say, ‘Sorry I’m bugging you, but I think you’re the greatest’ (Farber, “Score One for Women,” 8/12/1996, p. 72). This poignant example points to the empowerment that derives from the media’s projection of these women and the relation that is held between fans and the athletes, but more importantly, a female role model. In this instance, gender does play a role in the way the women are observed, yet does so in a manner that teaches and celebrates the ability for a multifaceted self.

In talks about the growing visibility of women’s athletics catapulted through the performances and exploits of this U.S. team, an interesting event grabbed the attention of the media by one of the key members of the team, Brandi Chastain. As West & Zimmerman (1987) discuss the concept of “doing gender,” a particular action by Chastain turned this idea upside-down. At the conclusion of the 1999 World Cup victory, Chastain ripped off her shirt in celebration, a customary tradition of male soccer players after scoring a goal. While this fell inside the constructs of socially masculine behavior for soccer players, the cultural expectations placed upon female actions were entirely violated. But, the media’s portrayal, rhetoric, and opinions of Chastain’s behavior supported her action as culturally acceptable in the soccer world. She was depicted first as an athlete, rather than by her gender. The media did not show any disapproval for Chastain breaking expectations of feminine gender norms.

The consequences of Chastain’s decision were far reaching, not only to the sporting world, but also to the political and social realm as well as indicated in the following *U.S. News & World Report* article, where Army Reserves Chief Lt. Gen. James

Helmy said that his women reservists have been inspired by the success and drive of the Women's Soccer Team and Brandi Chastain, asking for the undergarments.

'I told them to go out to the Sports Authority and buy them,' crows the three-star general. His order is already having a big impact. Female reservists don't get clothing allowances like active-duty soldiers to buy sports bras. But soon the bras will be standard issue when reservists are mobilized. As for those already in Iraq sans 'Brandi bras,' the Army says it'll be sending care packages of sports bras to Baghdad. ("Sports bras, the latest in U.S. Army fashion," 2/2/2004, p. 70)

An example of Butler's (1990) notion of gender fluidity to the core, this progressive thought that advanced through the impulsive decision by a woman celebrating a victory that not only proved to be just for a game, but also moved beyond the rigid frame of masculine and feminine towards an interplay of gender identity. The women troops related to this fluidity of gender in their daily lives and while it is only a small detail, the concept of a Chief Lieutenant General understanding the importance of both aspects of these women's identity broke through barriers of tradition on account of the bold behavior of Chastain. As Cirksena and Cuklanz (1992) suggest, this partially provides a solution of rejecting binary dualisms by creating an environment where both components can be accepted, valued, and understood.

The topic of the jersey waving was also referenced in articles, not necessarily in any suggestive or evaluative manner towards Chastain's femininity, but rather as description to further the visibility that the sport and team gained through the action. "She was captain of the league's San Jose CyberRays and a national team stalwart whose penalty kick won the 1999 cup for the United States--and much publicity for herself (and

the sports bra) as she ripped off her jersey and waved it in jubilation.” (Benjamin, “Socking it to Women's Soccer,” 9/29/2003, p. 78) As described, this sentence first highlights the athletic prowess and accomplishments of Chastain as an athlete, while making the jersey incident more a point of reference to the readers, marking it as celebration, rather than including judgment.

Included in talk of this action was also its impact on the economy and what role this behavior had in terms of advertising, a topic close to the concerns of print media. All those in doubt of the salesmanship abilities of the U.S. women's soccer team should tune in to reruns of the World Cup final and watch the exuberant Brandi Chastain rip off her Nike shirt and expose her snug-fitting black Nike sports bra to the world. Was it premeditated product placement? Or "temporary insanity" as the 30-year-old defender later claimed? (Ackerman, “She Kicks. She Scores. She Sells,” 7/26/1999, p. 78) Though discussing an artifact that is clearly a characterization of femininity, the focus of these questions above falls not on the sexualization or performance of femininity, but moves directly toward questions deemed to be in the minds of the reader. There is not content in this section highlighted by talk of specific athletic skills, rather discussion about the achievements of this group of women as a whole. Additionally, the emphasis of this rhetoric rests on the impact these women had on others outside of the athletic arena, not because of their gender, but because of the power they gained through competing to be their best. Therefore, the highly publicized sports bra, was described as more of an advertising tool, than a feminine item.

Through the celebration and glorification of women athletes as holding multiple, unfixed identities, the performance of gender behaviors should not cause a woman to be

caught in the 'double bind,' but allow for flexibility in creating identity from the circumstances and interactions from which she is involved. An interesting nuance of looking at the U.S. women's soccer team is that in our society, unlike other societies, the sport of soccer does not have the same exposure, attention, and glorification for men as it does in, for instance, European countries. Because football in America is such a highly publicized and entirely masculinized sport, soccer, while still a contact sport, finds itself with stereotyped notions that are less than masculine due to the comparison. I wonder what affect that has on the hype surrounding these women in a sport that cannot be categorized as "male dominated" in the U.S.? Further research into this topic will only bring to light more ways in which the media can be a factor in influencing positive identities of women.

CONCLUSION

In completing my critical-historical analysis on the coverage of the US Women's soccer team beginning with their inaugural 1991 World Cup victory up until the dissolution of the team following the 2004 Olympic Gold Medal, it is an absolute certainty that the visibility of women athletes in the media improved in quantity. There is still a need for continued progress to reach equality in the amount of coverage between men and women, but the content brings to light the enthusiasm and intensity of women's athletics. In regards to gender bias, my findings indicate that by the mid-1990's the depiction of female athletics is rooted in competition and sheer desire to excel, just as much as their male counterparts. Through analysis, I have come to the conclusion that the reason for this evolution in the media's depiction of women athletes overall was created by the achievements and representations of the US Women's Soccer Team. This suggests that the US Women's Soccer Team was the gateway group for more equal and accurate portrayals of women athletes in the media today.

Over the span of more than two decades, the increasing amount of coverage on the US Women's soccer team was found to be directly impacted by the successes experienced by the group as a whole, as well as the victories of their individual female members. In further analysis of the content of the articles, evidence indicates that being a "woman," does not necessarily mean always displaying a fixed, universal sense of self in order to be accepted in society. When the women soccer players performed gender characteristics subscribed to both females and males, it was proven they still won approval and popularity by both the media and society. This was true for depictions about

the women regardless of whether they were placed in athletic, career, social, or family settings.

While I found that the depictions of women athletes in the media exemplified gender fluidity, it is also important to note that the increased visibility of women in sports created a rhetorical platform to discuss gender inequity in the media. With that acknowledgment and push for change, research shows that females within the athletic arena are still the “marked” gender, performing within a male-oriented field. While gender bias can still be found in reporting, the idea that women can be multifaceted in their gender identities is gaining ground. Performing various identities through the media builds the foundation for new cultural gendered norms, acceptance and expectations for a woman’s gender fluidity.

The first set of articles in my analysis began in the late 1980’s through the early 1990’s, of which I found that expected cultural gender roles were supported and portrayed. Not only was there minimal coverage of women’s athletics, but the depictions of the female athletes were those in strictly non-contact sports. The coverage during this time period corresponded with the findings in my review of literature, suggesting that media coverage is much greater for those women athletes who compete in “sex-appropriate” sports (Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Kane, 1988).

The coverage suggested the women were ultimately driven to be a part of athletics due to the fun of participation. Articles in both *Sports Illustrated* and *U.S. News and World Report* during this time supported previous research on the media’s representations of women athletes in a feminine, personal light first, and athletically second (Knight &

Giuliano, 2003). Even with the success of the US Women's Soccer team, prior to, and following the 1991 World Cup win, there was a complete lack of coverage in both media outlets during this time.

It did, however, become evident that even without media coverage, the U.S. Women's World Cup victory of 1991 paved the way for later changes in media coverage of female athletes in the late '90's. The established success is what afforded women a voice and the opportunity to speak and acknowledge gender inequities and fluidity in the latter part of the decade. The increased coverage in the mid-late 1990's opened up rhetorical space for the women to push for gender equality in sports media coverage. Towards the mid-1990s, media coverage of female athletes increased in both *Sports Illustrated* and *U.S. News & World Report*. Additionally, my analysis of articles during this time period clearly showed the sports media emphasizing competitiveness whether covering male or female athletics. The media displayed competitiveness as the foundation to their coverage, suggesting that is what is most appealing for readers, regardless of gender.

The first articles devoted entirely to the U.S. women's soccer team appeared in *Sports Illustrated* and *U.S. News & World Report* in June of 1995 to preview the World Cup. As women's sports on a whole continued to gain greater acceptance, the celebratory stories and highlights of the U.S. Women's Soccer Team began to arrive when the team earned respect and admiration through performance on the field. The women's team further proved their place as a gateway team by gaining media popularity in a sport that struggled to find its place in society, regardless of gender. Unlike sports of basketball or baseball, we witnessed a special phenomenon as evidenced by the acceptance and growth

of the US women's soccer team at an even greater rate than that of the men's soccer team.

At the '96 Olympic gold medal win, momentum increased and more coverage was seen in weeks prior, during, and after the victory, contributing to the concept of the rise of popularity in the media coming through both greater acceptance, and particularly great success. But, in each year, recognition and understanding of women's place, not only as sport participants, but sport competitors grew, in turn, increasing the quantity of articles about the team and the length of those articles.

The '99 World Cup win culminated as the highest level of media attention for the women's soccer team and was a significant part of the *Sports Illustrated* issues four weeks prior, during, and following the event. *U.S. News & World Report* followed suit, reporting on the celebrity status of Mia Hamm as a reason to watch the games, but focused more of their coverage on the changes occurring in the sport and social culture due to the unparalleled achievements and popularity of the team. While it was the same team and sport, the 2000 Olympic Games led to a plateau or slight decrease in the quantity of women's soccer coverage, but other women's sports, which included basketball, handball, swimming, track, and beach volleyball took precedence, rather than the more traditionally accepted female sports of golf, tennis, and gymnastics of the early '90's. This display of greater coverage on traditionally "sex-inappropriate" sports places the Women's National soccer team as the team that provided the opening for other competitive women's sports into higher cultural acceptance and appeal.

The second gold medal win and retirement of the five core players in 2004 sparked articles previewing, updating, and following the Games in *Sports Illustrated*, but the wins

of '96 and '99 garnered slightly more coverage during that time period. *U.S. News & World Report* lacked the amount of press that was apparent at the turn of the century as well, but increasingly referenced the U.S. women's soccer team and individuals in shorter articles that focused on the sport, as well as other national issues. The continued growth of success in women's soccer was met with a leveling off or slight drop in the quantity of coverage by 2004, which seems contrary to what would be expected. However, during this same time, the U.S. women's softball team, named the greatest of all-time, also shared a great deal of the spotlight. Evaluating the coverage of women's sports in general could be described as an explosion. The U.S. women's soccer and softball teams were placed in the headlines and forefront of most articles covering the 2004 Olympic Games. But other women's sports also shared in the media coverage. For example, swimming, basketball, women weight lifters, platform divers, water polo, handball, and gymnastics also filled the pages of these media outlets. These second-tier sports were receiving either increased coverage or, in some cases, media coverage for the very first time. Increased quantity marked a new day for women's coverage as well as the female athletes that were highlighted. Images showed smiles, grunts, and emotion-filled action shots, displaying the many facets of what a woman can be while contradicting the conclusions of previous literature findings that state a trend to only cover feminine, non-action poses. While in my study, the quantity of women's soccer coverage slightly declines, the overall support of female athletics can be marked as a sport victory in that a greater amount of press was afforded to women's sports on a whole, as more teams were finding success and earning the spotlight.

The other component to this study dealt with the manner in which women athletes were represented in the media during this time period. Through the study, I found a strong indication that the rhetorical space created by the US Women's Soccer Team classifies them as the gateway team to the changes in how female athletes are perceived in the media. Support for West & Zimmerman's (1987) notion of "doing gender" and performing different roles in relation to circumstances is present in these articles, which points towards the change in societal gender norms when it comes to sport. The references and descriptions of the growth in social popularity and media coverage of these women function to create rhetorical space for women athletes, and also females in general, to challenge traditional notions of femininity and to open up representations of gender fluidity. Whether through the quotes of the athletes themselves or the thoughts and observations of the media, there is now a voice and place in the media to discuss and evaluate the state of women's athletics in society. While these statements of support shed a positive light on the acceptance of the US women's soccer team, the rhetorical space allows for awareness of the success by this particular group of women athletes, and victories for women in all arenas of life. The rhetorical space also creates an understanding for the challenges this team, and individual members have faced as well, whether it is fighting for equality in sports coverage, or simply battling some of the challenges women face on a daily basis. This is seen most clearly in the *US News & World Report* articles due to the fact that the focus of the magazine is on prevalent news as a whole, rather than a sport focus. Therefore, when discussed, it can influence the perspective and opinions of the general society, rather than just the sporting world, on the gender fluidity of these female athletes..

It's also important to note that in these articles, descriptions of these women as multifaceted and complex did not necessarily indicate that their femininity be contrasted against their athleticism, but simply a part of their identity. This supported Butler (1990) in the theory that there is no one unified category of "woman." There could be gender fluidity outside of athletics, as well as various components of one self that were highlighted either in accordance or in contrast to others.

My analysis suggests that identity can be formed and constructed due to situation and circumstance, as well as through interaction with others. It is important to understand what an enormous impact the membership of the US Women's Soccer Team had on each of these women's identities. While Mia Hamm, Brandy Chastain, or other players may be highlighted due to specific accomplishments, their membership to the U.S. Women's National Team renders the largest sense of identity through what Gergen (1991) would call the "relational self." Through the experiences the team shares together, both the athletes themselves, and the ways that they are represented in the media create identity through the interactions with one another and the notion of an "us." The stories, emotions, and relationships are constructed through and with teammates as one fragment of self, just as the interactions with a partner, family, or religion constitute another part of one's identity. This continues to show the fluidity of one's self based on varied circumstances.

Not only could readers create a perceived sense of identity for these female athletes, but the notion of these women, being part of an entity greater than who they are on their own, displays the impact that family and friendship can have on gender identity. Many readers can relate with the notion that interaction in close relationships can have a

profound impact on identity, thus having the potential to influence others that gender fluidity comes about through our close relationships. Through the depiction of gender in these articles, the connection between masculinity and sport that dominates representation of athletes in sports media is broken down. The relation and interaction shown between women athletes becomes identical to the relation and interaction we know of male athletes belonging to an athletic team. The identity becomes one of an athlete, rather than a focus on femininity or masculinity. Identity is created because of the understanding of emotions, feelings, and a passion in sharing a fragment of yourself with others like you.

One of the most important findings pointed to the notion that perceptions of self-identity can be constructed through quotes, suggestions, and opinions that fans, viewers, or readers have on a particular group. Although previous literature suggested that sports continues to stake claim in masculine identity, the depictions of fans and their reactions towards these women promoted the message that even though females in sport remained the “marked breed,” society and the general public views these women as respected athletes, capable of exhibiting both feminine **and** masculine behaviors.

Past research marks feminine personal descriptors of women athletes as subsequently disrespecting athletic abilities, but this historical analysis has show that beginning in the mid-1990’s, the media celebrated gender fluidity by highlighting the women’s accomplishments on and off the field. The depictions showed women athletes being multifaceted humans, rather than adhering to strict gender labels.

The articles effectively identify the ways in which success on the field is a critical component to who these women are, regardless of whether it embodies past notions of

“woman”. Being fierce competitors is glorified and positively reported as glowing attributes for the women on the US Soccer Team. It was the combination of previously prescribed masculine and feminine qualities that launched women athletes into increased prominence and visibility. The suggestion by Butler of “woman” as multiple and discontinuous, rather than a static, universal self was consistently exhibited throughout the media representations of this team.

The popularity of these women and the increased attention they’ve brought to women’s sports has helped break the mold of media coverage for other female athletes as well. Through the evolution of this group of athletes, women’s soccer can more accurately be called the gateway sport that challenged traditional notions of gender in female athletics, allowing for a more fluid representation of gender among current female athletes. It is the brute force of a contact sport, combined with the charisma of these athletes as women that depict the multifaceted self. The abundance of athletic descriptions and emphasis on the importance of winning sharply contrasts this position with that of the notion that women have greater propensity for participating in sports for pleasure, enjoyment, and health benefits.

Through the celebration and glorification of women athletes as holding multiple, unfixed identities, the performance of gender behaviors should not cause a woman to be caught in the ‘double bind,’ but allow for flexibility in creating identity from the circumstances and interactions with which she is involved. An interesting nuance of looking at the U.S. women’s soccer team is that in our society, unlike some others, the sport of soccer does not have the same exposure, attention, and glorification for men as it does in, for instance, European countries. Because football in America is such a highly

publicized and entirely masculinized sport, soccer, while still a contact sport, finds itself with stereotyped notions that are less than masculine due in comparison with depictions of U.S. football. The reason why the findings so strongly suggest the US Women's Soccer Team is the gateway team and sport to growing representation of women's athletics in the media, is not only because they increased awareness and overcame challenges based on their gender, but also did so in a sport with relatively low popularity in general in the United States. I wonder what affect that has on the hype surrounding these women in a sport that cannot be categorized as "male dominated" in the United States? Additionally, this study found that the U.S. Women's Soccer team opened up the possibility for gender fluidity in other female sports. Is this also seen for women in places like the workplace? How do television shows or films represent women in positions of power, such as CEO's, judges, law enforcement officers, or politicians, whereby women often show both masculine and feminine behaviors? Looking further than just media representations, I believe a study about perceptions within the workplace would be beneficial in examining gender fluidity as well. Are there different job positions within the workplace that have functioned as a gateway to gender fluidity, providing similar openings that the U.S. Women's Soccer team for other women's sports?

Another direction where ideas about gender fluidity in women's athletic can be applied is grade school, high school, and college sports. Rather than a content and historical analysis of media coverage, studies such as participant observation or focus group data can look at the social acceptance of gender fluidity within female athletics. Are there any differences when it comes to age? Do individuals such as teammates, peers, coaches, or parents have different levels of acceptance in regards to gender fluidity?

There are countless directions that studies can take to dig deeper into ideas of gender fluidity and how it is enacted and perceived in society. Further research into this topic can also bring to light more ways in which the media can be a factor in influencing positive identities of women.

This study took a historical content analysis of the media's coverage of women's athletics through the 1990's and into the early part of the 2000's. Not only was their massive growth in the quantity of coverage for women's sports, but specifically for the U.S. Women's soccer team. As media depictions showed this particular team displaying both masculine and feminine characteristics on and off the field, the idea of gender fluidity proved to be accepted and cherished by society. It is possible for women to perform or enact traditionally masculine or feminine identities throughout their daily lives. The U.S. Women's soccer team played a significant role in challenging traditional notions of gender identity, acting as the gateway team for the representation of women athletes as a whole.

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