Volleyball, but Make it Sexy: Mediated Representations of Female Athletes

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Abstract

The female athlete experience is complicated and beautiful. Women were long excluded from the world of sport and looked at as “masculine” when they did compete. To combat this fear of seeing “less feminine” women, sport organizers and mass media overcompensated; now we see sportswomen wearing less. This trend is especially evident in my own sport of volleyball. By examining the evolution of the beach volleyball uniform and media representation of the sport, I hope to map patterns that can be tracked in other female sports. I will call on frameworks established by researchers Linda Fuller, Paul Davis, and Janet Fink to help us understand how meaningful differences in media coverage of female athletics shape consumption of female sports and impact the female athletes themselves. To situate the work in context, I will provide a historical perspective on female athletics, looking at the rise of popular media and its impact on women’s sports. When sex is used to sell sports, female athletes become pawns in an unwinnable game.
Thank you to my supervisor Amanda for the hectic Zoom calls, my parents for the midday Facetime advice & coffee shops across Florida and North Carolina for supplying good work vibes–and iced chai lattes.
My Own Standpoint

Through this research process, I have been exposed to the stories of many other female athletes and the struggles they face in this environment. Although I make certain claims on the ways female athletes have been sexualized in the media, I also recognize my perspective is that of a white, middle class, bisexual, able-bodied woman. I wanted to research this topic because of the ways it has personally affected me and the women around me. This is also the industry I spent the last five years devoting my life and at times succumbing my entire identity to. I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the different experiences of female athletes of color, other LGBTQ+ athletes and those from other socioeconomic backgrounds. I want to address that most “sportswomen” I refer to in this analysis and in the research done often reflect a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class female athlete with a leaner body type that reflects “idealized femininity.”
Chapter One: Volleyball, but Make it Sexy

“Undressing” the Female Athlete

In the summer of 2021, the Norwegian women’s handball team was fined 150 euros (around $175) per player for the 10-member roster debuting athletic shorts rather than their typical bikini bottoms in their European Beach Handball Championship bronze medal match (Chappell, 2021). The European Handball Federation announced the fines were due to “a case of improper clothing,” later adding, “all efforts will be taken in order to further promote the sport. This includes the ideal presentation of the sport, and by that, includes the outfit of the players” (Chappell, 2021). The team had warned officials in advance of their decision and later said they were proud to make a statement by wearing shorts instead of bikini bottoms. “We are overwhelmed by the attention and support from all over the world! We really hope this will result in a change of this nonsense rule!” the team added. Like early beach volleyball rules, the sport requires female athletes to wear bikini bottoms with a “width maximum of 10 centimeters”, whereas the male athletes are required to play in tank tops and shorts “no longer than 4 inches above the knee” (Chappell, 2021).

The Norwegian Handball Federation has been fighting to change this rule since 2006, but it was not until the uproar following the July fine that changes started to happen. Finally, the sport’s international governing body announced the official rule changes in October of 2021 (Radnofsky, 2021). Beginning in January 2022, handball athletes will be required to wear “short tight pants with a close fit” and a “body fit tank top” when competing. Now that’s progress. Prior to the rule change, females could be fined or even disqualified unless they wore “midriff-baring tops and bikini bottoms” (Radnofsky, 2021). Male uniforms, on the other hand, remain the same. President of the Norwegian Handball Federation referred to the change as “both a real and
symbolic step” in the fight against gender inequality within the sport (Radnofsky, 2021). This is nothing we haven’t seen before, though. Uniforms have been used to standardize groups through wearing the same clothing, as seen in schools, in the military, and on sports teams. As I will demonstrate throughout my research, the female athlete uniform has become a site for sexualization and as a way for those in power to control the sex appeal of their sport. Looking at the ways that media represents and emphasizes female athlete uniforms reveals the greater issue of standardizing these women as objects. Uniforms aren’t just an outfit; they are used to sell an image. Who decides on that image? Basically, everyone besides the female athletes themselves.

Rubén Acosta, president of the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) from 1984 to 2008, once said of his athletes, “the image that the players project to the public is very important, if they don’t project an image that people like to see, then the public will not pay any attention” (Cantelon, 2010 as cited in Fabian, 2020). The FIVB, founded in 1947, is the international governing body over all forms of volleyball, whose members include more than 200 participating countries (Fabian, 2020). His quote is referencing the 1999 FIVB decision to regulate beach volleyball uniforms by “mandating that female competitors wear two-piece bikinis” while “male athletes, on the other hand, were required to wear shorts above the knees” (Fabian, 2020). This rule change marks a shift in the image of the sport projected by its governing body: rather than the primary focus on athleticism and performance, the FIVB sought to increase “public interest” and enhance “popularity and visibility of the sport” (MacDonald, 2009). The FIVB’s two decision-making bodies, the Executive Committee and Board of Administration, was nearly entirely comprised of men (Fabian, 2020). The response immediately following the uniform change was mixed. By mandating female athletes to compete in bikinis, this international governing body was essentially “eliminating self-determination” for its athletes.
(Fabian, 2020), as well as promoting the “objectification and ‘sexploitation’ of female athletes” (Sailors et al., 2012). Looking at how sexualization plays a role in beach volleyball uniform requirements reveals the “patriarchal nature” within international sport (Cantelon, 2010). Strict uniform requirements demonstrate the relentless drive to ‘sell’ particular images of female sport to the media,” reducing these athletes down to what they wear (Cantelon, 2010).

Throughout the years, other changes have been made to the FIVB handbook regarding uniform requirements. The 2004 edition of FIVB’s Olympic Beach Volleyball Tournaments Specific Competition Regulations clarified the women’s required uniforms as, “the top must fit closely to the body and the design must be with deep cutaway armholes on the back, upper chest and stomach (2-piece) …the briefs should be a close fit and be cut on an upward angle towards the top of the leg. The side width must be maximum 7cm. The one-piece uniform must closely fit, and the design must be with open back and upper chest” (FIVB, 2004). Male beach volleyball players competing at the same Olympics were required to compete in “shorts and a tank top” (FIVB, 2004).

In an FIVB press release from March 18, 2012, the organization announced another modification of the uniform requirements to allow for a third option for female beach volleyball athletes competing at the London 2012 Olympics: “shorts of a maximum length of 3 cm above the knee with sleeved or sleeveless tops or a full body suit” (FIVB, 2012). FIVB spokesperson Richard Baker stated the rule change was made to accommodate religious and cultural requirements, in turn increasing opportunities for participation in the upcoming Olympic Games, but also added the FIVB didn’t “think [we] will see much change” (Sailors et al., 2012). Although these rule modifications show an attempt by the FIVB for inclusivity of all its female athletes’ uniform needs, the image of a bikini-wearing beach volleyball player had become a
cultural norm and even influenced the governing bodies of other female sports. In a 2004 interview with Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) President Sepp Blatter, he suggested female soccer players wear skimpier uniforms and tighter shorts to both promote “a more female aesthetic” and “increase popularity of the game”. He went on to say, “Let the women play in more feminine clothes like they do in volleyball…Female players are pretty, you excuse me for saying so, and they already have some different rules to men—such as playing with a lighter ball. That decision was taken to create a more female aesthetic, so why not do it in fashion?” (Christenson & Kelso, 2004 as cited in Fink, 2013). Five years later, the Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS) league website announced new uniform modifications to include the option of a skort for its athletes in hopes of achieving a more “gender appropriate” look (MacDonald, 2009). The new option attracted few across the soccer community.

In the world of tennis, superstar Serena Williams has also endured the sexualizing effects on her body and uniform. The tennis pro wore a catsuit to the French Open in 2018, which was quickly banned by the tournament organizers for being “inappropriate and disrespectful to the game” (Intezar, 2020). In the 2002 US Open 16 years prior, Williams similarly wore an outfit described as “a body-clinging, faux leather, black cat-suit” that received a lot of attention from popular media (Schultz, 2005). The original “catsuit” inspired mixed reactions from spectators, fans, critics, and the media, ranging from admiration to disgust (Schultz, 2005). Both responses reflect how the governing body of her sport, popular media and her fans have their own ideas of how she should look. Instead of focusing on her dominant performance or game statistics, the most recurring story from the tournament was about her appearance. Williams reflects a more muscular, dominant, and physical tennis player, as opposed to the slim, lithe frame of most of her opponents (Schultz, 2005). Her game apparel not only highlights her powerful physique, but also
has been described as suggesting a deviant sexuality (Intezar, 2020). Journalistic and promotional representations of tennis have long emphasized a “compliant sexuality”, one that prefers traditional femininity as seen in the smaller frames of other popular tennis players (Schultz, 2005). In this case, a thinner, leaner body type has been the expected norm in the tennis world. Williams’ image has been defined by others as “deviant” based on her uniform choices. Another example of female athletes being defined by what they wear. Do we see a pattern yet?

Despite the way she is sexualized in media, Williams speaks on her femininity and feminist pursuits to break barriers within her sport in interviews. “I want women to know that it’s okay...That you can be whatever size you are and you can be beautiful inside and out. We’re always told what’s beautiful, and what’s not, and that’s not right” (Intezar, 2020). Although Williams experiences relentless media scrutiny of her physique, she has more important things to worry about. “I don’t have time to be brought down, I’ve got too many things to do. I have Grand Slams to win, I have people to inspire, and that’s what I’m here for” (Wells, 2015 as cited in Intezar, 2020). She also feels confident and powerful in her outfit choices. When asked about the catsuit following the 2018 French Open, Williams said, “I feel like a warrior in it, like a warrior princess kind of, [a] queen from Wakanda...I feel like a superhero when I wear it” (Intezar, 2020). Williams illustrates a critical point: women should feel empowered, comfortable, and confident in their sport’s uniforms. Instead of appealing to every need of its athletes, women’s uniforms are used as a site for viewing pleasure. While all female athletes would love to feel like Serena Williams in her catsuit, research shows female volleyball players’ perceptions of themselves are negatively impacted by the uniforms they compete in. Although volleyball uniforms provide a source of enjoyment and draw to the game for fans, not all players share the same sentiments.
Jesse Steinfeldt, Rebecca Zakrajsek, Kimberly J. Bodey, Katharine Middendorf and Scott Martin interviewed nine indoor volleyball players from the same NCAA Division I team in 2012. Their research examined the experiences of female intercollegiate volleyball players to “better understand their beliefs about their bodies.” Results suggested the uniforms can have a direct effect on the athletes’ performance and ability to focus on the game (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Questions were divided into categories to assess different variables that may have an effect. Players’ perceptions about “how they believe their uniform specifically affects their body image and athletic performance, both negatively and positively” were measured to assess the impact their uniforms have on their self-image (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Categories within this domain include everything is hanging out, shows all imperfections, pregame performance, in-game performance, and functionality of uniform. The first category, everything is hanging out, was discussed in eight of the nine interviews. “Our short are just really short and really tight, and you know. Your butt hangs out, your legs are flopping around when you are diving on the floor. I just feel like that’s a lot to be seeing.” Shows all imperfections was a general response from all nine players, one player saying, “There is no room to hide anything. If you have one imperfection, everybody is going to see it, so you’d have to be really okay with yourself to not have to worry about that.” Of the nine players interviewed, four of them discussed pregame performance as a concern. One 20-year-old player stated, “I’m definitely a little more self-conscious about what I’m doing and keeping myself, like, looking nice, and what my uniform is doing and how I’m looking in my uniform”. All nine players discussed in-game performance and how their awareness of the uniform and their bodies in front of crowds helped contribute to constant adjustment of their uniform between plays or during breaks in action. “I wasn’t thinking as much about the game as I should have been…I would be worried, pulling my spandex down so I
wasn’t falling out of them. Or pulling my jersey down so people wouldn’t see my stomach or my hips. It would take away from my concentration definitely.” These genuine experiences reveal how the self-image of female athletes is put at risk due to the fit of their uniforms.

Most of the interviews in Steinfeldt et al. (2012) described the negative effects of volleyball uniforms. One category, *functionality of uniform*, examines the uniform in a positive light. Players described the aesthetic appeal of their uniform as a “source of intimidation” for their opponents, or the ways the uniform enhanced performance. “It helps because it doesn’t get in our way as much because we are doing quick, fast movements, changing directions constantly, jumping up and down close to the net...if we were to have a baggy uniform, it might get caught in the net and we’d get a net call and that’s lost points to us” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). This view of the uniform is similarly shared by some of the top beach volleyball players in the world.

Following the 2012 FIVB uniform modification to allow more options, former Olympic beach volleyball gold medalist Natalie Cook said, “You won’t see me change my uniform. I will still be in the bikini—90 percent of athletes will stay in the bikini” (McDonald & Korporaal, 2012 as cited in Sailors et al., 2012). Misty May-Treanor, three-time Olympic gold medalist, added, “We’re staying in ours. I don’t see too many people changing” (Golen 2012, as cited in Sailors et al., 2012). Her partner, Kerri Walsh-Jennings, also said, “I think it’s part of the alluring part of our sport, which is women in bikinis, but on the flip side of that, we need to be wearing bikinis. You don’t want to be wearing baggy clothes and be lost in your clothes...we found something that is functional and sassy at the same time” (Sweely, 2012 as cited in Sailors et al., 2012).

While these quotes are from the 2012 games, similar sentiments were shared by 2021 Olympic gold medalist April Ross. “I have always felt like when you get somebody drawn in, however you get them in to beach volleyball, they fall in love with the sport...so, hopefully that happens
also” (Pieper, 2021). This suggests that these female athletes are exploiting their bodies for media attention, and they know it.

**Beer & Babes**

Media in all forms has a massive effect on its consumers. TV, print, and social media reflect the values and priorities of the world around them. In magazines, the cover page is arguably the most important part of the magazine itself. It is used as “primarily a sales tool” and must be “provocative, hard-hitting and full of elements that sell—not feature oriented” (Malkin et al., 1999). Fashion and lifestyle magazines are often the lens through which we see women, especially women’s bodies. The media creates a story or sells an image that tells us as consumers what women’s bodies are supposed to look like, how women are supposed to act and how to become our most attractive and feminine selves.

Similarly, sports media is the lens through which we watch our favorite athletes’ games, interviews, and everyday life. This is especially evident during the coverage of the Olympic Games every four years. “Rather than turning to the media to view the latest news on a conflict somewhere in the world, people turn to the media to watch the struggles and triumphs of athletes from all over the world” (Bissell & Smith, 2012). It was reported 4.7 billion people worldwide tuned into the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, leaving viewers to experience the event entirely mediated through their TV screens (Associated Press, 2008 as cited in Bissell & Smith, 2012). This mediated experience “allows for the broadcast commentators and announcers to play an important role in the way the game, the players, and specific teams are represented and viewed by audiences” (Bissell & Smith, 2012). Like the cover page of a magazine, the broadcast coverage of an athletic event gives a broader glimpse of what is going on inside the game. How does this TV coverage influence the way female athletes’ bodies are portrayed? Analysis of the
way sports—especially a hyper sexualized one like beach volleyball—are covered across sports media reflects a similar pattern we've already seen. Media representation of the female athlete body is another site for sexualization, one that also has an impact on those receiving the messaging.

Research has consistently shown that media approach women’s sport with an “either/or discourse of pretty or powerful that [constructs] femininity and athleticism as incompatible” (Bruce, 2015). Stereotypical gender roles support the idea that women cannot be perceived as both beautiful and strong. In beach volleyball specifically, research has pointed to two glaring gender roles often assigned to its female athletes—sexual object and mother (Sailors et al., 2012). Prior to the London Olympics, beach volleyball athlete Kerri Walsh made statements to the media that highlight these competing roles in her own life. On her children joining her at the sporting event, Walsh said, “In London they’re on my team, they are going to be wearing their Team USA diapers. They are very patriotic; they’ll be wearing their own sports performance equipment...and I’ll be wearing my bikinis and together we’re gonna do it” (Zeller, 2012 as cited in Sailors et al., 2012). Walsh’s comments emphasize the contrasting roles of mother and athlete, maintaining the “centrality of motherhood,” while also highlighting the sexualization of her sport by mentioning the bikinis (Sailors et al., 2012). Female athletes are either praised for their near-naked bodies on display or for their ability to compete while simultaneously juggling the role of a mother and wife (Sailors et al., 2012). In such examples, it is hard not to feel it is increasingly less about athletic performance, and more about *the look*.

Following the 2012 FIVB modifications to allow for more coverage with uniforms, media quickly reassured the sport’s fanbase that the half-naked bodies would not be going anywhere (Golen, 2012). An ESPN article following the announcement began with, “Fear not,
fans of beach volleyball—or of the women who play it” and went on to describe how many top players would not be switching to the more modest option approved by the FIVB (Golen, 2012). Author Jimmy Golen added the bikini uniform option “doesn’t hurt the TV audiences, either, as television producers zoom in for close-ups of the women signaling to each other by holding up their fingers against their behinds.” The objectification of these beach volleyball athletes is deliberate, and articles like this one highlight and encourage the sexualization of these players. As I will show later, this objectification has an impact on the mental and physical health of athletes. Media organizations deliberately harm women and degrade their sports in pursuit of views, which equals profit. The work of researchers Paul Davis and Linda Fuller expand on this idea in their work, highlighting tactics used in media that emphasize femininity and sexuality and establish female athletics as a site for viewing pleasure.

Research shows that media focuses on female athletes’ appearance and apparel more than their male athlete counterparts, as well as reference women’s sexuality over their strength (Bissell & Smith, 2013). In *Philosophical Perspectives on Gender in Sport and Physical Activity*, author Paul Davis details three qualities of sexualization commonly found in various media coverage of women’s sports. The first is a “deliberate focus on particular, sexually significant body part(s) for the purpose of sexual titillation,” illustrated in close-up angles of beach volleyball players’ backsides when at the net (Davis, 2010). The second quality notes how “body postures are intended to be sexually titillating through freezing or emphasis,” shown in a newspaper article published by the *Toronto Sun*, including an image of a female beach volleyball player bent over, emphasizing her backside and genital area accompanied by the caption, “God bless Bondi beach” (Davis, 2010). The journalist wrote how much he enjoyed covering women’s beach volleyball because of the “beer and babes” at the event (Sailors et al., 2012). The caption
above reflects Davis’ third sexualization technique, which describes photographs that have an “accompanying punned caption that confirms the moment as one of sexualized comic relief” (Davis, 2010). While Davis’ work illustrates how sexualization occurs in print media, sexualization in commentary and sports reporting is detailed in the work of Linda Fuller, researcher and Professor of Communications at Worcester State University.

Linda Fuller’s book, *Female Olympians*, reflects on the treatment of female athletes in sports reporting, detailing four means by which female sports are gendered in media. The first is *masculine generics*, a method of “presuming maleness as the standard by which all sports should be measured” (Fuller, 2016). An example of this is referring to women’s teams as “defensemen” or having a “workmanlike orientation.” The second reporting tactic is called *gender marking*, in which female sports are referred to as the “women’s athletic event(s)” or teams referred to with names like the “Lady Gamecocks” (Fuller, 2016). Gender marking is regularly littered throughout the media and has developed into standard practice and daily common parlance. Other examples of gender marking include references to the “Women’s World Cup,” “Women’s Final Four,” and the “US Women’s Open Championship,” all establishing the men’s events (“World Cup,” “Final Four”) as the standard and the female events as the “other.” Gender marking can also be observed in the worldwide headline following Andy Murray’s 2013 Wimbledon win that read “Murray Ends 77 Year Wait for British Win”. The article failed to acknowledge British female athlete Virginia Wade winning Wimbledon 36 years prior, considering it was the women’s title and most stories assumed the men’s as the standard (Chase, 2013 as cited in Fink, 2013). Analysis of the 2021 Tokyo Olympics showed female athletes were referred to as “female [sport]” 13.6% of the time in comparison to 2% of the time for male
athletes. Although subtle, gender marking reiterates male athletes as the “true” athletes and females as the “other” (Rep Project, 2021).

Fuller’s third example of language used in Olympic reporting is called naming conventions, in which female athletes can be subjected to trivialization or infantilization through being called “girls,” “dolls,” “young ladies,” or even “princesses” in some cases (Fuller, 2016). Several other researchers highlight how commentators refer to elite female athletes as “girls” rather than “women,” while male athletes are rarely referred to as “boys.” Women athletes are also infantilized by commentators using their first names as opposed to their last (Rep Project, 2021). Infantilizing women athletes “tempers the symbolic threat posed by successful adult sportswomen by representing them as ‘girls’ in a domain–sports–that is a primary space for constructing and defining masculinity” (Wensing & Bruce 2003, as cited in Rep Project, 2021).

Fuller’s fourth reporting tactic is descriptive linguistics, which involves several subcategories of referring to female’s physical appearances and sexuality over athletic performance, infantilizing female athletes and undermining women’s sports (Fuller, 2016). Current research shows some improvements in these tactics defined by Fuller, but examples from the most recent Olympic Games reveal lingering problems (Bruce, 2015). In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, a Team GB football player’s “swishing blonde” ponytail was the subject of conversation during the match, as well as a male reporter pontificating about the “beautiful” smile of a rugby player (Fox, 2021).

Other qualitative differences between male and female coverage have been examined by researcher Janet Fink, an expert in the marketing of female athletes and women’s sport and the Associate Dean of University of Massachusetts Amherst (Fox, 2021). These tactics include differential framing, ambivalence, and different production techniques that emphasize the female body (Fink, 2013). Differential framing looks at the way female and male athlete success and
failure are treated differently in mass media. In her article “Female Athletes, Women’s Sports, and the Sport Media Commercial Complex: have we really ‘come a long way, baby’?” (2013), Fink describes how male athletes’ success is more often “attributed to talent and hard work, while female athletes’ achievements are often attributed to luck, a strong male influence, or emotion.” Commentary of male athletes’ failure often include references to tough conditions and achievements of their opponents, whereas “lack of skill, commitment, concentration, and aggression” are often used to describe female athletes’ failures (Fink, 2013). This differential framing is most often found in sports deemed “female appropriate” (more feminine attire, aesthetically more pleasing, lack of physical contact amongst participants). For example, an analysis of media commentary during the 2004 Olympics found that “gender biased commentary occurred more often in the sports considered ‘artistic’”, such as gymnastics and diving (Billings, 2004 as cited in Fink, 2013). Such negative framing is often paired with positive narratives, a reporting tactic Fink describes as ambivalence.

Ambivalence is described as “coverage that appears positive at first glance, but actually includes words, phrases or themes that subtly belittle women” (Fink, 2013). This tactic is used to “simultaneously acknowledge the changing norms regarding women’s involvement in sport and yet resist major changes to the status quo by artfully undermining women’s athletic accomplishments” (Fink, 2013). Commentary from a Tokyo 2020 Olympic football match between New Zealand and the United States National Team illustrates that the issue of ambivalence in media reporting is still present (Fox, 2021). During the game, a British commentator continuously forgot the name of a forward on the American team and used the wrong one. In a previous match between Great Britain and the Netherlands, the commentator had gotten two players’ names wrong and was unaware of a coaching change that had happened
months prior. Two-time football Olympian Rebecca Smith described listening to the commentary as “entering a time warp.” “There wasn’t really any time where I really felt like this full panel of media is really interested in the game, follows the game (or) knows really in-depth about the game,” Smith said in a CNN interview. Researcher Janet Fink was included in the same article, telling CNN it was hard to understand how in 2021 “you could call someone who’s a world-renowned athlete a girl...I mean, if you just flipped it, and you thought about a commentator talking about (a male athlete as a) boy...it’s comical” (Fox, 2021). In this example from 2021, the naming conventions Linda Fuller introduced are once again employed.

*Production techniques* like camera angles and shot variations are used to create a more engaging production and greater excitement for sports fans, including close-ups and emphasis on different areas of the body (Fink, 2013). Researcher Cheryl Cooky, a Purdue University professor who studies the representation of women’s sports in media, gave her insight in a 2021 interview with the university. “Women’s coverage is absent, largely, of the elements that we know make watching sport highlights compelling and interesting: exciting commentary, colorful, descriptive, animated delivery, and thoughtful, high-production value interviews and game footage. When you compare women’s coverage to men’s, the women’s comes across as quite bland,” Cooky said in her interview. There is much less emphasis on creating a fun experience for fans through these elements, and more emphasis on instead finding a way to sell women’s sports through sexualized images. Referencing back to the earlier work of researcher Paul Davis, production techniques like these have also been at work in print media, both in the past and in current media representation.

Research shows countless examples of media in the early 2000s that illustrate the various tactics discussed above at work and the ways they impact others’ perceptions of beach volleyball
athletes. An article written in Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* is an example of the shameless sexualization exercised on beach volleyball during the 2012 Olympics (Reguly, 2012). Author Eric Reguly describes the Olympic beach volleyball arena as “an enormous sand box for bikini-clad volleyball players, carefully waxed and shaved for fear that the TV close-ups of bums, boobs and other bits might reveal something amiss.” Later, Reguly questions the legitimacy of the sport by asking, “Sorry to be insulting, girls and boys, you look like very good athletes, but are you really Olympic-quality material?” followed by making a statement that “any of the top athletes in most of the other Olympic sports…could become beach volleyball experts within a day or three.” Beyond his blatantly ignorant remarks on the athletic abilities needed to compete in beach volleyball, he also made several comments on the players being “cute,” watching girls slapping each other’s behinds and hearing an accompanied moan from the male spectators and concluded the article by saying he had no idea who “actually won” the match, as he didn’t care and assumed no one else did either.

**Sex Sells, Baby**

When asked about the ways male and female athletes are treated differently in media, producers, commentators, and editors usually explain that they are “constrained by a combination of market forces, and by their desire to give viewers ‘what they want to see’” (Fink, 2013). This perspective ignores the circular quality of the “production-reception relationship” in sports media, which examines the impact of various production techniques on an audience. The reporting tactics I described above support the trivialization of female athletes’ accomplishments and “renders women’s sport less attractive to viewers” (Greer et al., 2007 as cited in Fink, 2013). We have established the mediated relationship of sports media and how “what is covered, how often it is covered, and the manner in which it is covered all impact audience perceptions of
value and quality” (Entman, 1993 as cited in Fink, 2013). Because of this, these decision makers (producers, commentators, etc.) are “not merely reflexively reacting to what their audience wants to see” but instead are the ones creating audience demand (Cooky et al., 2013 as cited in Fink, 2013). Media representation of female sports has long revolved around the idea that “sex sells.” This concept illustrates how deliberate and intentional media sexualization is and has been for decades. As 1920s sportswriter Paul Gallico said, “It is axiomatic that nothing so gladdens the heart of a... Sunday page editor as the picture of a pretty girl or a group of pretty girls in one-piece bathing suits...the newspaper editor and publisher for many years has been aware of the value of s.a. [sex appeal] in his pages as a sales stimulus” (Pieper, 2021). The cycle never ends when producers, writers, editors, and publishers choose to sexualize these women and create a demand for more sexualization in their consumers.

Researchers have identified another major contributor to the perceptions of female athletes, known as the “sports media commercial complex,” an observation that has an “enormous influence in framing how society views women’s sports in general and female athletes in particular” (Kane et al., 2011 as cited in Kane et al., 2013). Such framing has both micro and macro impact on the cultural perceptions of female athletes. At a micro-level, the portrayal of female athletes “has significant social and economic outcomes in that media narratives as both written and visual texts influence their acceptance—and thus marketability—in ways that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes” (Kim et al., 2006 as cited in Kane et al, 2013). Thinking more broadly on the issue, researchers have also identified how this sports media commercial complex is a “particularly powerful and effective tool for preserving hegemonic masculinity and thus male power and privilege” (Connell, 2005 as cited in Kane et al., 2013). Media representations of sport “reproduce” these dominating ideologies that place sport as “male
terrain” or a “cultural center of masculinity,” deeming women’s sporting achievements as trivial or ignoring them altogether. Sports media has created a cycle of constantly producing content that diminishes women’s sports to feed its consumers, which in turn reinforces the stereotype that female athletes are not worth devoting airtime to. The lack of quantity and quality of female sport coverage has a noticeable impact on not only the athletes, but the audiences’ perceptions of those athletes as well.

The Body Issue Has...Issues

A research study released in 2020 investigated college students’ perceptions and attitudes towards media images of female athletes with both an appearance and athleticism focus. Previous studies have shown the sexualized portrayal of female athletes can “negatively impact viewers’ attitudes...including perceptions of competence and moral standing” (Daniels et al., 2020). Findings also show that objectified women in media are perceived to “possess less self-respect, be more sexually experienced, and be less competent, determined, intelligent, agentic, fully human, warm, and moral” (Daniels et al., 2020). Other studies have found similar patterns; overall, “objectified athletes are perceived more negatively by viewers than sport performance athletes” (Daniels et al., 2020). Sexualized representations of women not only affect their perceptions of themselves, but also audience perceptions of these women as well. The researchers note that existing research has “dichotomized media images of female athletes as either sexualized or sport performance.” By blurring the lines and using images that include both sexualization and sport performance (termed sexualized performance), this study sought to examine the impact that diverse sexualized images have on viewer’s attitudes toward female athletes. Researchers used sexualized, performance, sexualized performance and non-sexualized (control) images to observe the ways audiences responded to each. Sexualized performance
images were pulled from *ESPN The Magazine’s* Body Issue, a recurring piece introduced by the sports media giant in 2009.

*ESPN The Magazine* released the Body Issue as “a celebration of the athletic form” (Hull et al., 2015). The issue features male and female athletes posing either semi-nude or completely naked. Following its inaugural release, the issue became one of the magazine’s best-selling both on the newsstands and in terms of advertising revenue (Hull et al., 2015). Previous research found no significant difference found between the number of male and female athletes included in the issues. Quantitatively, ESPN included the same amount of male and female athletes throughout the issues. There is a clear difference in the quality of the photos, however. Accompanying research observed that female athletes were “more likely to be depicted as sexualized (posed in a manner that highlights a sexual body part) compared to male athletes, who were more likely to be framed as athletic” (Daniels et al., 2020). Though strides have been made in providing equal exposure of male and female athletes, media representations of women’s bodies haven’t seen these similar improvements.

Participants perceived and rated sexualized and sexualized performance (Body Issue) athletes as less competent and lower in self-esteem than performance athletes (Daniels et al., 2020). Even though the Body Issue seeks to “allow people to stop and marvel at the works of art these bodies truly are,” the findings of the study show that viewers are likely to devalue women when they are shown in a sexualized context, regardless of whether their athleticism is also highlighted or not. Sexual appeal ratings for sexualized performance, non-sexualized, and performance athletes were similar, illustrating a normalization of the sexualization of sportswomen’s bodies in the media. This study is an example of how media representations can have a significant impact on how people view women’s sports and those participating. The more
we portray female athletes as sexual objects for viewing pleasure, the less audiences will view women’s sports as requiring skill and athleticism.

In an explanation released on their website, ESPN said, “Each year, we stop to admire the vast potential of the human form...to imagine how it would feel to inhabit those bodies, to leap and punch and throw like a god” (ESPN.com, n.d.). By this logic, one would expect to flip through the Body Issue to see pictures of athletes leaping, punching, and throwing “like gods.” Instead, we find images of these world-class athletes “doing incredible physical feats such as ironing, cooking, draping their bodies seductively over objects, lying in bathtubs, or swinging on tire swings” (Hull et al., 2015). Although ESPN frames both male and female athletes in ways that diminish their athletic prowess, the consequences of this decision are more damaging for the females being displayed. As we have touched on, it is far more common to see female athletes framed in ways that “highlight their femininity, sexuality, or in a domestic manner...their athleticism takes a backseat to their talents as women, as domestic engineers, or as mothers” (Bernstein et al., 2013 as cited in Hull et al., 2015). ESPN was given an opportunity to break away from the media norms, but instead chose to reinforce longstanding stereotypes of the female athlete. By framing both male and female athletes in these passive poses, the Body Issue has successfully “created equality in nudity or an issue of objectification for all athletes involved” (Hull et al., 2015). Their claim of “celebrating the athletic form” boils down to a “cleverly designed marketing campaign for athlete eye candy.” The Body Issue is simply another way for media to sell an image of world-class female athletes as objects for viewership, more specifically as objects for the male gaze. As sports marketer Richard Armato said, “If you want to be successful as a woman who is an athlete, sex appeal has to be part of the equation” (Ewing & Grady, 2013 as cited in Hull et al., 2015).
It’s All in the Numbers

Though most of this section has focused on the quality of various sports broadcasting techniques in female sports, it’s equally as important to note the massive disparity in the quantity of coverage as well. Outside of coverage of the Olympic Games every four years, female sports receive noticeably less attention than their male counterparts, regardless of the dramatic increase in female sports participation since the end of the 20th century. A 30-year longitudinal study comparing the broadcast content of three local news affiliates in Los Angeles and that of ESPN’s SportsCenter from 1989 through 2019 shows that this trend only continues into the 21st century. Researcher Cheryl Cooky and others found in 2014 that “quantity of coverage of women’s sports in televised sports news and highlights shows remains dismally low” (Cooky et al., 2015) in comparison to their initial report in 1989. While they have found qualitative differences that suggest there has been a decline in sexually charged articles in print media, the sheer amount of coverage of women’s sports has made little improvement in 30 years. In their study, they examine three local Los Angeles news outlets and compare their coverage to that of media giant SportsCenter. Looking at the lack of coverage of women’s sports reveals how impactful the quality of coverage is on an audience. Such few minutes allocated to female athletics allows the dominance of sexualized coverage to persist. The little we do see is of women wearing little. The little we hear is about how we’re seeing women wearing little.

On a random day in July of 1989, three Los Angeles news affiliates were observed sharing zero coverage of female sports. The only focus on any woman from the entire day came from a clip of a large-breasted female spectator, commentary included. 25 years later, on July 21, 2014, those same networks again showed zero coverage of female sports (Cooky et al., 2015). Of the 934 news segments from these networks observed over the 2014 sample, 880 of them were
about men’s sports, 22 were based around gender-neutral sports and 32 were devoted to covering women’s sports, totaling 23 minutes of more than 12 hours of broadcast material recorded. Of the 405 SportsCenter segments recorded, 376 were men’s sports, 16 gender-neutral, and 13 women’s sports, or 17 minutes out of nearly 14 hours of content. The study also presented an analysis of lead stories, teasers and running tickers. None of the broadcasts analyzed from the 2014 sample studied began with a women’s sports story. “Teasers” are often shown before commercial breaks to build interest and keep audiences watching for upcoming stories. Out of 145 teasers analyzed through the Los Angeles newscasts, there was one teaser related to a women’s sports story, and only three out of SportsCenter’s 199 teasers. Lastly, the analysis covered running tickers at the bottom of the TV screen that show scores and breaking sports news not being covered within the broadcast. The 2014 study showed 2% of ticker time on SportsCenter being devoted to women’s sports and two of the three Los Angeles affiliates that showed tickers adding up to 6.1% of time devoted to women’s sports. While the authors note that this ticker time increased from 3.2% in 2009, they also point out that overall coverage of women’s sports decreased on both networks. Some could argue that this increased ticker time represents “progress,” however the authors also note that the ticker at the bottom of the screen “functions as a kind of visual and textual ghetto for women’s sports” which allows anchors to devote their primary coverage to men’s sports and instead relegate women’s sports “literally to the margins of the screen” (Cooky et al., 2015). The work of Fuller, Davis, and Fink helps us understand the impact of these low numbers and lack of primary coverage. Anchors determine men’s sports to be the focus and women’s sports to represent the “other”, devoting far less time to the latter. The time that is devoted often reiterates the dominance of sexualized images and commentary, giving us little room for higher quality media representation.
In a 2019 interview, researcher Cheryl Cooky gave updates on her then 30-year study. Data gathered five years later found that women’s sports still receive the same amount of news coverage as they did in the 1980s (McCarter, 2021). “Over the past 30 years, we have not seen meaningful change in the amount of coverage women athletes receive,” Cooky said. Their study found that coverage of female athletes on televised news and highlight segments like ESPN’s SportsCenter totaled only 5.4% of all airtime. Coverage in 1989 was observed at 5% and at 5.1% in 1993, confirming that little has changed in 30 years. Beyond that, taking out coverage of the 2019 Women’s World Cup brings that total down to 3.5%. Cheryl Cooky’s quote from 2014 can still be applied five years later; coverage of women’s sports today remains dismally low. Cooky et al. reveal that the “portrayal of women athletes has become increasingly ‘respectful’” over the last 10 years, though. The article claims that “news and highlights commentators have become far less likely to joke about women or portray women as sexual objects,” but instead present the sparse number of women’s sports stories in “matter-of-fact, uninspiring, and lackluster” manners (Cooky et al., 2015). The 2019 report shows “women athletes are treated with more respect than in the past, but there is a clear lack of energy and excitement” (McCarter, 2021). But what about those fines given to the Norwegian team a few months ago...? Lackluster broadcast coverage also has an impact on its consumers. Those who argue “women’s sports aren’t as interesting to watch” are being fed a small percentage of low-quality coverage. But hey, at least they aren’t talking about sex appeal as much, right?

The numbers clearly show that time devoted to women’s sports is far less than that of men’s sports. Cooky, Messner and Musto (2015) also note in their research that within the broadcast time constraints, networks still manage to include “human interest” stories on men’s sports with little to no coverage of women’s sports. The same Los Angeles networks mentioned
above aired stories of bees invading the Red Sox vs Yankees game, a ribbon cutting ceremony for a restaurant opened by a former Dodgers manager, a story discussing if a newly traded Lakers player will be able to find a good burrito in his new city and another segment on a stray dog that wandered into the Milwaukee Brewers’ stadium. As the authors state, these four examples are an illustration of various dynamics that position men’s sports as the focal point for broadcasts (Cooky et al., 2015). Despite slight improvements, the problem persists.

Up to this point, we have analyzed the ways that uniform restrictions and media representation of female athletics have impacted both audiences and the female athletes themselves. The theoretical frameworks from researchers Janet Fink, Paul Davis and Linda Fuller reveal deep gender issues within the sports industry. Female athletes are pigeonholed into a feminine, sexualized image that is most comfortable for consumers to view. The tactics we have discussed subtly undermine women’s sports in ways that some may not even notice. Sports coverage has historically kept the focus on femininity separate from the athleticism of its female athletes. Throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, trivializing sexualization or humor at the expense of female athletes was most popular within mass media. This began to shift in the 2000s, when athletes were “typically framed as wives, mothers and girlfriends” (McCarter, 2021). The next section of this paper will provide a historical context and lens through which we can view these gender roles in sport. While I have provided examples on the ways that female athletes are sexualized through uniform requirements and media representation, looking back through history can help us understand how our views on women in sports have developed.
Chapter Two: Time for a Brief History Lesson

Act Like Men, Talk Like Men, Think Like Men

In many countries, sport emerged as an example of the patriarchal, aggressive, masculine world around it. Early games like rugby and cricket reflected the masculinized sport phenomenon and transformed simple, localized public-school games into “highly organized activities which became powerful and symbolic representations of all that was deemed by the ruling classes to be worthy in the Anglo-Saxon male” (Allen, 2014). Although it is easy to find a wealth of historical reports, autobiographies, films and novels on sport, the history focuses on “a long tradition of celebrating men’s sports and men’s lives in sports” (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014). This lack of female sport representation also highlights a “long-established commonsense ideology that males…are more suited to take part in energetic and aggressive forms of physical activity than are females” (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014).

For centuries, doctors believed that women were too weak physically and emotionally to play sports, especially endurance sports like running and swimming (Edwards, 2017). Though poor women were allowed to exert physical activity in their work in fields and in factories, medical professionals claimed wealthy and middle-class women were not capable of vigorous physical activity (Edwards, 2017). Throughout the 1920s, women in the US were warned that excessive physical activity would interfere with their menstruation and cause their reproductive organs to harden or die. The women who chose to participate in sport anyway were viewed as too masculine. A reporter for American Mercury wrote in an article in 1930 that sporty women “act like men, talk like men, and think like men”, that they would have a hard time finding a husband and should instead stay at home (Edwards, 2017). This brings us back again to Fuller’s notion of masculine generics. Sports were generically and by default masculine.
US high school physical education programs increased female participation but kept a separation between girls and boys in sport programs. Boys’ programs focused more on high competition sports, whereas girls’ programs focused more on rhythmic movements, dance, and less competitive sports. Educators in charge of these programs believed that this division took advantage of girls’ and boys’ natural abilities. It was not until World War II that we saw major shifts in females’ interest and participation in professional sport.

Women in the US had been playing sports when World War II came around in 1941, but more opportunity for them arose when men entered the military and “left behind their jobs on farms, in factories, and in sports” (Edwards, 2017). One such opportunity arose on the softball and baseball fields. Chicago Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley founded the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) in 1942, which included teams with names like the Milwaukee Chicks, the Fort Wayne Daisies, and the Rockford Peaches (Edwards, 2017). These names once again employ the “naming conventions” tactics we have seen before. Organizers of the league, including Wrigley, were concerned about their athletes appearing too manly, so they required all AAGPBL athletes wear lipstick and short skirts “unsuited to sliding into bases when playing” (Edwards, 2017). Off the field, these women were “forbidden to wear pants and had to take charm classes, polishing their manners and learning to behave like ladies” (Edwards, 2017). Popularity of the league peaked in 1948 with nearly one million in league attendance and dropped in numbers in the following years. Regardless, the AAGPBL marked the “beginning of women’s professional sports in the United States” (Edwards, 2017). As soon as men returned from war, however, women were expected to return to their socially acceptable roles. Writers and psychologists described women wanting to push the boundaries of their expected roles and work as “lost, riddled with guilt, and filled with hate for men” (Edwards, 2017).
Throughout the 1950s, researchers have noted the rise of the middle class, those members of society that worked in “offices, department stores, and a wide variety of government jobs” (Edwards, 2017). This middle class of America, or “common” people, participated and “enjoyed their games and amusements perhaps even more than their social superiors did” (Warner, 2006). Sports like bowling, softball, and roller derby were considered working class sports, but sports that grew the fastest were “often those that reflected the country-club, upper-class lifestyle the middle class sought to copy” (Edwards, 2017). This “trickle-down” effect brought sports like tennis into the average American’s lifestyle. As more Americans moved outdoors, a demand for appropriate sports clothing grew. Here begins gendered sportswear, not necessarily for performance alone but for the idealized image of a women playing sports.

**Is That a Woman Wearing...Pants?**

Until World War II, clothing remained distinctly divided between men’s and women’s, as strict gender expectations ensured men dressed in more masculine fashion and women more feminine. There was also little interest in blurring the lines between the sexes, as most were “happy to dress appropriately for their sex” and even “aghast when the bohemian few tried to cross over” (Warner, 2006). However, with the war came new needs, usages, and attitudes about traditional dress for women. During the war years, women wore pants and “easy, carefree pieces” that became a permanent part of their wardrobes. This marked a monumental shift of cultural understanding for women to wear trousers, “the symbol of masculinity for five hundred years,” openly and acceptably. For the first time, we see a freedom given to women that they had never experienced before; a “freedom in their dress, unbound from the societal and physical restrictions of the past” (Warner, 2006).
This freedom was also reflected in the growing interest in sport and exercise that marked the early 19th century. Earlier in this era, “sport” was considered part of the public sphere, while “exercise” was private. In public, women were expected to maintain a modest and demure appearance, while also wearing the fashion representative of the time. For this reason, clothing for sport was considered “clothing for interactions with men” (Warner, 2006). This gender separation in clothing followed the example of the education structure that had been in place for centuries; young men were always educated together, whereas women were not. Once schools of higher learning for women were established, a need for clothing for physical education grew, as well as a newfound freedom away from the social constraints that operated when men were around (Warner, 2006).

As women became increasingly interested in participating in sport, various technological advances improved both the quality and access to sportswear. In the mid 19th century, croquet became the first sport that women were allowed to participate in. With this opportunity came a need for new clothing to accommodate physical activity (Warner, 2006). Floor length dresses and skirts were no longer practical and for the first time, we began to see exposed skin on these croquet-playing women. Skirts became shorter, revealing women’s feet and ankles for the first time. This not only marked the first official sporting event women began participating in, but also the first instance that the female body was looked at in a more erotic way (Warner, 2006). Check out those ankles, fellas! Shortly after croquet, tennis became the newest sport allowing female participation. A “jersey” material was developed for tennis sportswear in 1879 and tennis skirts quickly became a trademark of the sport (Warner, 2006). More skin = more exposure for women in sports. This realization revolutionized sports and introduced the “uniform” into sporting activities. Sports historians often ignore the significance of clothing as a factor in the
development of women’s involvement in athletics, but without appropriate and functional clothing options, successful female participation would never have been possible (Warner, 2006). What began as a need for functional clothing articles instead became an avenue to sell a curated image of the female athlete. Although technology had evolved to improve sportswear, attitudes regarding females participating in sports weren’t evolving at the same pace, nor would they for decades to come. World War II marked a time of slightly shifting attitudes on women and physical activity, and the decades that followed were vital in growing female athletics into what we know today. Within educational institutions, the demand for equal representation continued to grow. The result of this demand? Title IX.

You know you’re only here ‘cause of Title IX, right?

After the sport participation boom of World War II, Americans began changing the way they looked at the world and women’s freedom. Title IX, enacted in 1972, represents a major milestone in the history of women’s sport. The law prohibits sex discrimination in institutions with federally funded educational programs, opening the door for intercollegiate women’s sports teams (Belanger, 2016). Prior to its enactment, women’s athletics “primarily consisted of club sports or intramural teams” (Busch & Thro, 2018). It was impossible to predict the massive impact that Title IX would eventually have on athletics, one that changed the demographic of athletes in schools and colleges “by force of cultural rather than legal will” (Fields, 2008). In the immediate years following Title IX’s introduction, there was still little traction on those wanting to provide funding for women’s intercollegiate teams. Some claimed that the funding for these women’s teams took too much away from the men’s teams (Belanger, 2016). One such example was a letter sent from renowned University of Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler to President Gerald Ford in 1974, arguing that Title IX would pose a “serious threat to men’s
college sports because…most women athletes would be interested in a Rose Bowl–like experience for themselves.” Schembechler and his peers feared that “sharing resources with women athletes would threaten the viability of men’s college sports” (Belanger, 2016). Regardless, sports transformed from “being a purely masculine preserve to one in which American females were tolerated, if not always accepted” (Fields, 2008). In 1971, the year preceding Title IX, less than 300,000 females participated in high school sports nationwide (Brake, 2010). Today, the National Federation of State High School Associations reports that almost 43% of high school athletes are female.

Although the passage of Title IX was a major turning point, it was hard to see the implementation at the ground level of universities. Changes were made to the law in 1979; the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) issued a “Policy Interpretation” that addressed many issues and concerns of Title IX and created a test to “preserve and expand sports offerings for women” (Brake, 2010). Under the test, athletic programs were required to comply with the equal-accommodation regulations of Title IX by satisfying at least one of three tests. Schools must either:

1. Provide “intercollegiate level participation opportunities for male and female students in numbers substantially proportionate to their respective enrollments”

2. “Show a history and continuing practice of program expansion which in demonstrably responsive to the developing interest and abilities of the members of [the underrepresented] sex”; or

3. Demonstrate that “the interests and abilities of the members of [the underrepresented] sex have been fully and effectively accommodated by the present program”
This three-prong test was established to develop and promote the athletic endeavors of women, continuously regarded as the “underrepresented sex in the vast majority of athletic programs” (Brake, 2010).

While the added requirements of Title IX marked a new standard for how institutions should handle equality, challenges persisted. A 1984 court decision determined that Grove City College, a private religious college in western Pennsylvania, did not fall under Title IX requirements since the college did not receive direct federal education grants (Brake, 2010). The court’s decision also impacted the law’s requirements on sports, as athletic programs don’t directly receive federal funding. The Grove City ruling ignited a “grassroots movement to overturn the Court’s decision,” with those in favor of overturning it arguing that the “ruling would turn back the clock on recent gains for girls and women in sports” (Brake, 2010). Hearings held in 1984 to overturn the bill focused on the “widespread discrimination against women in sports and the need to address it” (Brake, 2010). Emerging from these hearings was a broad consensus across members of Congress that ending discrimination based on sex in sports programs was an important “national policy goal” (Brake, 2010). With that ideal in mind, the Civil Rights Restoration Act was passed in 1987 to overturn the Grove City court decision and restore the institution wide Title IX interpretation.

Title IX and its proceeding amendments have proved to be major catalysts for female participation in intercollegiate athletics. Females survived numerous attempts to prevent them from participating in sports. Though we can praise Title IX for improving opportunities for females in athletics, the policy doesn’t address the underlying issues of sexualization and media representation we have touched on. This points us to “equality” being the target for change, not the overwhelming attitudes towards females in sport. Title IX points us in the direction of
equality by providing equal opportunities for female athletes and funding for these women to participate. Title IX paved the way for female intercollegiate athletics, but the issues don’t stop there. Looking at the history of the Olympic Games both pre- and post-Title IX show similar patterns.

The Olympics date back to 776 BCE Olympia, Greece, during a time when women were “not only excluded as participants, [but] they were not allowed to even be spectators–unless they were certified vestal virgins or…prostitutes” (Fuller, 2016). Fast-forward to 1892; French historian Baron Pierre de Coubertin proposes a modernized Olympics and spends the following three years gaining traction for the idea (Warner, 2016). His version of the modern Olympics, however, did not include the participation of women. Instead, de Coubertin once said, “women have but one task, that of crowning the winner with garlands” (Warner, 2016). The first few Olympic Games reflected the ideals of the late nineteenth century; women were limited to roles within the family and the home, and athletics was not a welcoming arena for them. De Coubertin supported this ideology. He hated the sight of women sweating, claiming that it reduced women to “painful grins that give them sexless faces and bodies” (Warner, 2016). What a guy. 1896 saw the first official Olympic Games take place in Athens, without a single woman entered amongst the 311 athletes competing, a result of the strong influence de Coubertin had on the organization of the event. The second Olympic Games, held in 1900, included 12 women of the 1,330 competing athletes, although records show that no one really knows how the women even got in and were able to compete (Warner, 2016). Throughout the first six Olympic Games, the total number of female participants amounted to less than 2% of the entire field of athletes. Although that number has since increased, female involvement still barely reached 35% by the turn of the 21st century (Warner, 2016). The 2012 Olympics in London was a major milestone; female
athletes outnumbered their male counterparts for the first time in history (Virbitsky, 2012 as cited in Kane et al., 2013).

Increased female sport participation on all levels brought newfound media attention to women’s sport, especially during worldwide events like the Olympic Games. In the early Games of the 20th century, there was little to no media coverage of the females participating. The first American woman to win gold in swimming at the 1920 Olympic Games, Ethelda Bleibtrey, donned the first variation of swimwear that spectators had ever seen. The *New York Times* never ran a photo of her following her Olympic win. Although her win marked a monumental shift in the way that female athletes were perceived, the newspaper “could not accommodate a photograph of an Olympic swimming medalist in what society still considered an immodest swimsuit” (Warner, 2016). While major strides were being made in female sportswear that allowed them to compete, the world did not reflect the same support of female athletes. Funny how times change, huh?

As media began covering women’s sports, it was only a matter of time before the headlines shifted onto the bodies of the sportswomen instead of their athletic achievements. I have discussed how commentary on male sports has often focused more on athleticism, physicality, and commitment to sport, whereas coverage of female sports instead focused on the athlete’s appearances and personal lives. This pattern can be observed most consistently in the sports of indoor and beach volleyball. Aside from the “bikini brouhaha,” volleyball was and remains one of the fastest growing sports for both children and adults.

“*Mintonette*” to “*Beach Babe*”

Volleyball was invented by William G. Morgan in 1895 in Holyoke, MA (Saxena, 2014). Morgan, physical director for the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), initially
designed the sport for businessmen that thought basketball was too rigorous. Morgan also first called the game “mintonette” after its similarities to badminton, but a college professor from Massachusetts noticed the volleying nature of the sport and proposed the name “volleyball” instead (Saxena, 2014). The game quickly picked up wide appeal for both men and women and spread across schools, playgrounds, armed forces, and other US organizations. Rules were created by the YMCA and NCAA in 1916 followed by the first nationwide tournament held in New York City in 1922. Due to its increasing popularity, the United States Volleyball Association (USVBA) was formed in 1928 and was recognized as the “rules-making, governing body in the United States” (Saxena, 2014). The game also picked up popularity outside on the beaches of California in 1930. Beach volleyball’s first official tournament was played in 1948 in Santa Monica. Indoor volleyball was added to the Olympics in 1964 and beach volleyball later in 1996. Since its addition to the Olympic lineup, volleyball has been “both a staple in Olympic TV coverage and a harbinger of feminist critique for fostering sexualized images of female athletes” (Boykoff & Yasuoka, 2015).

As beach volleyball gained traction in the media, athletes like Kerri Walsh and Misty May became the spokeswomen and faces of the sport. Players quickly became acquainted with the sexualized nature of their sport, and many embraced the understanding that their uniforms are a big piece of bringing fans to the games. In a 2012 interview with British beach volleyball player Denise Johns, she directly addresses the nature of her sport. “The people who own the sport [the FIVB] want it to be sexy. I used to play in shorts and a T-shirt and was reluctant to change. But if it gets volleyball attention, so be it” (Krupnick, 2012 as cited in Sailors et al., 2012). Examples like this show how volleyball athletes have been used by their governing bodies to sell an image of the sport they may not want. But sex sells, right?
Having a historical perspective on the sexualization of women’s sports reveals how much of the fault rests on both the governing bodies of sports organizations and popular mass media. When women were given greater opportunities for participation, they rose to the occasion. Not only has performance continued to increase, but overall exposure of female athletics has skyrocketed since the early days of Title IX. This is evidence of progress, but the work is far from over. Now that we’ve taken a glimpse at history, I want to bring us back to the present day. How will our pattern of using and exploiting women’s bodies catch up to us?
Chapter Three: We’re Fine, everything is Fine

#Thinspiration

There is a common thread weaved throughout the history of women in sports: expectations of women’s bodies are always evolving. These expectations have a real, detrimental impact on young women. Especially women that are participating in sports, an activity first deemed too “masculine” for females to participate. Although “female student athletes often desire a muscular body to be successful in sport,” this is not the same body type that fits into “traditional cultural norms of femininity” that are represented in modern media, otherwise known as the “thin ideal” (Steinfelt et al., 2012). This idealized body representing thinness and slenderness did not emerge as a “dominant cultural ideal” until the 20th century (Bordo, 2013). Affluent Western societies linked slenderness with “happiness, success, youthfulness and social acceptability” and overweight individuals with “laziness, lack of will power and being out of control” (Grogan, 1999). These perceptions were adopted by popular media, especially in the modeling industry. Models “became thinner and thinner between the 1960s and 1980s”, just as women were getting involved in physical activity (Grogan, 1999). This thin ideal combined with the physical demands of being a high-level athlete creates a pressure in the mind of a female athlete to find the perfect balance between the two, leading to body image concerns and self-objectification. Why does this matter? This section of my paper will dive into this question, highlighting the effects on real women and girls within athletics. I have both personally been affected by body image issues that impact female athletes and witnessed the experiences of teammates and members of other athletic teams around me.

Body image refers to the “perceptions and attitudes about one’s body, particularly physical appearance” and has also been described as a “complex social construct shaped by
The female athlete experience is especially unique, with “conflicting pressure to conform to Western culture body ideals while also meeting sport body ideals” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Female athletes are constantly navigating their athletic and feminine roles simultaneously. The world of athletics provides a “unique environment that places the physical body on center stage…in which their bodies are evaluated not only based on performance, but on appearance” (Greenleaf, 2002 as cited in Steinfeldt et al., 2012). The “socially desirable” thin body type and the “athletic” body type are constantly competing, reflected by female athletes reporting “the need to be strong, muscular, and powerful for their sport, yet also wanting to fit the societal ideal by avoiding being perceived as too muscular” (Greenleaf, 2002 as cited in Steinfeldt et al., 2012). This societal ideal has also been described as a “series of contradictions”– “firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin” (Markula, 1995 as cited in Steinfeldt et al., 2012). These societal expectations coupled with tightly fitting uniforms have paved the way for body image issues among young female athletes.

The objectification theory, coined by Fredrickson and Roberts in 1997, provides a deeper understanding of the “experiences of women who operate within a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Sexual objectification can be described as the “separating of a person’s body, body parts, or sexual functions from his or her person”, more specifically in instances where the focus is on “isolated body parts, such as bare stomach, buttocks, cleavage, or a bare chest, in the absence of a focus on the rest of the person” (Aubrey, 2006). Doesn’t this sound familiar to the pictures of beach volleyball players we see in mass media? Taken one step further, self-objectification refers to the “internalization of an observer’s perspective on one’s own body” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The perception of one’s own body is reinforced through “evaluations by and comparisons to others, such as family
members, peers, classmates, and media images” (Grogan, 1999). Although most media messages on women’s bodies are tailored toward women in the adolescent to adulthood age range, effects have been measured on girls much younger. Studies have “identified a desire for thinness in 6-year-old girls” that not only leaves them dissatisfied with their own bodies, but also leads to various forms of dieting (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Read that again. Six years old?! Women of all body types, backgrounds, and ages struggle with the everchanging standards of the world around them and how the image they hold of their own bodies intertwines with those standards. Like many other female athletes, I also have struggled with the dichotomizing body ideals of a collegiate athlete and that of a socially acceptable “feminine” woman.

I have played volleyball since I was in third grade and competitively since seventh grade. Unlike other young women, I was shielded from the stresses of body image until I reached college. Once there, I quickly came to the realization that I was now competing for a starting spot with girls that were also all-star players from their respective hometowns. Most times my collegiate sport was brought up in conversation, it was followed by a reference to spandex, the “small bikinis they wear in the Olympics” or namedropping of either Kerri Walsh-Jennings or Misty May-Treanor (three-time Olympic gold medalists in beach volleyball). Not only did I become very aware of how my own body was growing and changing, but also how the bodies of my teammates around me were as well. Leg muscles were now the norm, jeans didn’t fit me anymore and I ate more than I ever had before. Although I knew I was strong and that muscles were supposed to be “cool” and ideal for a volleyball player, I couldn’t help but compare the way I looked to everyone around me. My friends, other female athletes, volleyball players at other schools, it didn’t really matter who. I watched as clothes that used to fit me didn’t anymore, listened as people made comments about my new, muscular body after returning home and
thought to myself, “did I look that bad before?” I was having my first real experience with body image issues and body dysmorphia, problems that followed me throughout my entire collegiate playing career. At times, I put my entire identity into my volleyball performance and with that, the appearance of my body. After five years enduring the ebbs and flows of being a Division I volleyball player, I have learned how common self-objectification and body image issues are amongst female athletes across all levels of the sport.

Six former competitive female athletes reported that “their uniforms made them more aware of their shape and physique, which influenced feelings of dissatisfaction about their bodies” (Greenleaf, 2002). Other research has shown that female collegiate student athletes that wear revealing uniforms reported “feeling exposed and expressed concerns with how they looked, in addition to feelings of discomfort associated with their uniforms” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). These same athletes felt that the uniforms “exposed their size and musculature,” but also acknowledged “being perceived as sexy by heterosexual male fans” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Additionally, “wearing revealing uniforms contributed to these female athletes feeling that their bodies were sexualized rather than appreciated for their athletic performance” (Krane et al., 2004). These same sentiments were shared by the Norwegian handball team after receiving the fine for wearing shorts rather than bathing suit bottoms. The team said that their uniform is not practical for players constantly diving in sand and is degrading to women in general, also stating that the bikini-bottom design made them “very uncomfortable” (Radnofsky, 2021). These examples show the damaging effects of revealing uniforms, and how many athletes feel that their uniforms aren’t even functional for their sport’s physical requirements.
“Do you Have a Big Enough Size?”

Expanding on the earlier research of Steinfeldt et al. (2012) illustrates more of these competing body ideals inside the minds of a Division I collegiate volleyball team. As discussed earlier, the researchers sought to examine the impact of the athletes’ volleyball uniform on their performance and self-image. The participating athletes acknowledged societal expectations about “what a volleyball player’s body should look like,” as well as their personal expectations about wearing spandex to play volleyball. The following quotes in the remainder of this section are from volleyball players interviewed in Steinfeldt et al.’s work. Participants talked about the ways that being “muscular, tall and strong influenced their abilities on their court,” as well as “how their expectations of how being strong and physically fit could apply to other areas of life.” A 19-year-old player said, “If a coach or someone looks at me, they’re like, ‘Good, this girl is going to be powerful and stuff,’ because you would think she’s got all this power in her legs, she is strongly built.” Participants also described the kind of body people in society expect a volleyball player to have, including descriptions like athletic, fit, slim and muscually toned. One player said, “I don’t feel huge in my uniform. I don’t feel big. So I just feel like I’m normal compared to what the stereotype for a volleyball player would be.” As shown here, athletes often compare themselves to the idealized image they are told they should look like by popular media. On wearing spandex, athletes discussed the difficulties they faced in worrying about how they look in their uniforms. One player said, “I think it is a little too tight…You shouldn’t have to worry about how you look in the uniform. You should only have to worry about how you are going to play, and like, focus on the game.”

Another set of questions focused primarily on “impressions and comments that participants perceived were made—both indirectly and directly—by people around them,”
including coaches, teammates, significant others, and male spectators. On the ways that coaching messages affected players’ perceptions of their appearances and performances, one player said, “We heard that we had smaller uniforms so that everyone would want to lose weight or look better…they’d heard from our coach that we all needed to look, she wanted us to be aware of our bodies and want to look a certain way.” Athletes also generally said that teasing comments about uniforms and bodies were acceptable when they were made by teammates but unacceptable from competitors. A 19-year-old player specifically stated, “My teammates definitely make fun of my butt because it’s big. But, I mean it’s all in fun…But sometimes it’s annoying just because, I feel like even on the side other people make comments too.” When talking about significant others, the participants described their perceptions of comments about their revealing uniforms made by those around them (family, friends, teachers). “I think my family is not really a huge fan of them…my mom is always making sure, ‘Do you have a big enough size?’…she wants to make sure I’m covering myself up as much as possible and stuff.” Five players also reflected the assumption of heterosexuality (male fans sexually desiring female volleyball players) in their descriptions. They discussed how “objectifying comments about their bodies and uniforms made by fans—particularly male spectators—were expected and oftentimes uncomfortable.” One player discussed a specific example, “So I remember one game there was a student section and they had a white board and they were drawing our players, one by one, and our butts in the spandex. And I know everyone was completely distracted, not worrying about the game.”

Some players acknowledged a different perspective on the appearance of their uniforms. “I know a lot of guy friends that would come to our game specifically because it was girls in spandex. So a lot of times girls would, to get people to come to our games, we would be like, ‘You know you can come. It’s just a bunch of girls in spandex’…because I know that’s what a
Lot of guys come to our games for.” Here is another example of how volleyball players grow accustomed to the ways that their sport is sexualized. During my high school volleyball career, our team also made jokes about using our spandex to bring in more fans. Through my five-year stint on the Webb School of Knoxville volleyball team, we won the State Championship three times and came in second once. While I do believe that some of our fans came to watch an exceptionally talented group of volleyball players (ranked as high as 14th in the country at one point I might add), I also wasn’t ignorant of the ways that marketing our spandex usually didn’t hurt attendance either.

The final domain documented from this study describes how players compare themselves and their bodies to both other athletes and nonathletic peers. In comparing themselves to their teammates and competitors, one participant said, “If I had a choice I would definitely change some of the tightness of the uniforms…just so it would benefit everybody…because it does demote your confidence, and it does make you feel like, you compare yourself to other teammates and other athletes that look better in their uniforms.” These issues only seemed to increase when comparing themselves to nonathletic peers. “I definitely feel like we have bigger bodies compared to women who don’t [lift]…I feel like a man sometimes because you’re just building so much muscle and constantly working out and then you see little petite women who are, you know, a lot smaller. So I guess it could make me feel a little more on the manly side.” Spandex also made these athletes “particularly aware of weight and of certain body parts” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012).

**Same Old, Same Old**

Past research has also suggested that revealing sport uniforms play a role in these body image concerns across certain sports like dancing, cheerleading, and swimming (Reel & Gill,
2001 as cited in Steinfeldt, 2012). Revealing sports uniforms have also been linked to “disordered eating among female athletes” (DeBruin et al., 2011 as cited in Steinfeldt, 2012). Authors Thompson and Sherman (2010) provided examples of sports (beach volleyball, track & field) where “female athletes wore significantly more revealing uniforms”. They suggested that “possibilities exist for unhealthy eating behaviors to emerge as motivators for these female athletes to lose weight to look good in these revealing sport uniforms” and that the uniforms may serve as “physical and psychological distractions to on-court performance, in addition to precluding young athletes from participating in a sport.” This research suggests that by putting young girls in tighter, revealing uniforms, they are more likely to develop body image issues. Higher risk of body image issues also creates potential for the development of eating disorders (Steinfeldt et al., 2012).

Even with higher risks of body dissatisfaction, authors Krane and Stiles-Shipley (2001) suggest that “female athletes may not like wearing revealing uniforms, but [they] often become accustomed to doing so by repeatedly competing in that type of uniform over the years”. Known as the habituation effect, female athletes have developed this as well as other coping skills “necessary to focus attention away from self-presentation concerns during competition” (Krane, 2001). This effect was demonstrated in the Division I volleyball team study, as one player said, “It [wearing spandex] just took a while to get used to…I kind of felt like, ‘Should I even go out in public like this’…But then once I saw everybody else was wearing them, it was a lot better” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Previously mentioned comments from some of the top beach volleyball players also show the habituation effect at play. While some athletes may not love their bikinis as much as others, they have grown accustomed to and tolerant of feeling discomfort and vulnerable.
This same study supported findings from past research, including how “female student athletes face conflicting messages about their bodies in regard to how they look on the court and how they are supposed to look off the court” (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). The volleyball players from the sample were six inches taller but weighed 4 pounds less than the U.S. national average for women, recorded by the U.S. National Health Statistics Report (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). These women are considered fit and although not categorized as “overweight” or “obese” based on statistical criteria, they still reported having body image concerns, especially in relation to their sports uniforms. This research contributes to the previously mentioned notion that female athletes “live the paradox” between appreciating their power and strength while also having the awareness of the “contrasting societal body type expectations” that fuel a desire to avoid being “too muscular” (Krane, 2004 as cited in Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Will the comparison game ever end?

Sexualization of women’s bodies and athletic uniforms is a deeply rooted issue. The way media has covered the female body has also evolved over time. Examples of commentary, article headlines and production techniques throughout this paper place the female body on display and suggest that the focus should be entirely devoted to the appearances of these women. For years, women have been wearing their uniforms knowing they are being sexualized. Research confirms that this sexualization has a detrimental impact on both athletes and consumers. For the athletes, this impact takes shape through eating disorders, body dysmorphism and self-objectification. Audiences judge sexualized images of women more harshly than other images. Organizations like ESPN try to challenge this norm with attempts like The Body Issue, only to perpetuate the focus on bodies over athletic ability. Seems like the cycle is never ending. Modern feminist
research would say otherwise. The final section of my paper will explore a recent feminist theory suggesting female athlete agency can be used to rewrite a new narrative.
Chapter Four: This Sucks...Now What?

Sportswomen in the United States have always been subjected to sexualization of some sort. Whether it was the shock of seeing women’s ankles and feet during a croquet match or the horror of seeing her in the first developed “swimsuits,” the way we view women’s bodies has been a direct reflection of the values of the world around us. Cultural shifts range from elevator skirts to tennis skirts to Playboy magazine, and women shift accordingly. Are we totally screwed? Maybe. But maybe there’s hope for a new kind of female: one that can be masculine, feminine, beautiful, strong, athletic and anything else she chooses to be. Researcher Toni Bruce would agree, claiming that there are new forms of representation emerging, suggesting that our current sportswomen can be imagined as both “pretty” and powerful.

I’m Sexy...and I Know It

Throughout her article, “New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave,” Toni Bruce analyzes the impact of liberal feminism on previous researchers’ work and introduces a third wave feminist perspective that “recognizes, plays with, and examines the simultaneously empowering and problematic elements of sport practice” that we are seeing more of today (Chananie-Hill et al., 2012 as cited in Bruce, 2015). Bruce argues that past interpretations of media coverage have been profoundly impacted by liberal feminism’s “emphasis on gender equality with men within existing societal structures.” With this perspective, researchers often focused on glaring differences between women and men over similarities. She also points to more liberal feminist influence in the focus on the “apparently irreconcilable contradiction between femininity and athleticism.” Research has often reaffirmed this “pretty or powerful” dynamic, evident through research titles like, “Sexy versus Strong” (Daniels, 2012), “Pretty versus Powerful” (Jones et al., 1999), “Athlete or Sex Symbol”
(Daniels & Warten, 2011), “Athletic or Sexy?” (Kim & Sagas, 2014 as cited in Bruce, 2015), and news articles such as “Athlete or Sexual Plaything?” (O’Connor, 2004 as cited in Bruce, 2015). Studies in the past assessing the impact different images of female athletes have on audiences typically have “selected images that implicitly support an either/or binary” (Bruce, 2015). Bruce argues that this traditional “pretty or powerful” discourse has been weakened by the sheer popularity of girls participating in sports now compared to pre-Title IX era. Additionally, visible increases in performance (as seen in 2012) by female athletes has help to break down the stereotype. Within the sports realm, “participation is now an expected and valued activity for females in many countries” (Bruce, 2015). Bruce claims that the rise of third wave feminism has “proposed an alternative conceptual framework” that “challenges feminist positions that implicitly accept the determining effects...of sport and masculinity” (Bruce, 2015).

Third wave feminism employs a way of seeing the world “where our standard of measurement doesn’t start with a White-male heterosexual nucleus” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000 as cited in Bruce, 2015). Chananie-Hill et al. (2012) claims that third wave feminism is “contradiction, contrast, paradox, and an aversion to labeling” (Bruce, 2015). There are folks who are suggesting sportswomen are redefining gender expectations and ushering in a new era of the female athlete: one that uses her voice and embraces the “messiness and complexities of lived experience” (Cocca, 2014 as cited in Bruce, 2015). While hopeful, this “third wave feminism” does not come without critique, nor is it proving yet to influence mass media. Remember the Body Issue? Although a third-wave feminist may argue that participating in ESPN’s nude photoshoot is a reclamation of one’s sexuality and femininity, the images, and reactions to them instead position female Olympians in a no-win situation. Fans and journalists who initially highlighted female athletes’ sex appeal recoiled at these same athletes’ decisions to
pose nude for a magazine (Pieper, 2021). Olympic soccer goalie Hope Solo appeared in ESPN’s third Body Issue in 2011, to which a Bleacher Report article noted that many people felt she was “dining out on her sex appeal and titillating her way to wider fame” (Pieper, 2021). Female athletes either receive less attention and fewer endorsements if they avoid sexualization or receive condemnation for embracing it (Pieper, 2021). There is both an awareness of the sexualized image these women have been branded with and a realization of the potential profit they can receive off this image. Is this “third wave feminism”? Maybe, but the issue is complex.

Within this new feminist perspective, social media and the rise of the Internet age has had a profound impact on the exposure and visibility of women’s sports. Pre-social media age, television coverage, newspapers and magazines were the sole mediators between athletes and their fans, giving those working in these industries the power to create whatever images and write whatever stories they felt would entertain their audiences the most. The last two decades have seen massive technological growth, specifically Internet-based news, and social media (Bruce, 2015). Bruce describes the way these advances have “dramatically changed the field of representation, including an explosion in public voice and information sharing on social networking sites” (Bruce, 2015). Social media has created an avenue and platform for athletes to connect directly with their fans, especially female athletes. The explosion of social media granted the ability to “access, create and exchange ideas...outside the gatekeeping function of traditional media” (Bruce, 2015). Although the sports media space remains vastly controlled by men and littered with sexism, the Internet’s “openness and accessibility provides spaces where new discourses can emerge” (Bruce, 2015). The social media landscape has the power to transform representation of female sports and place power into the hands of both female athletes and fans of women’s sport. This has created new forms of imagery and storytelling, diverting
control away from traditional sports media. Although the changed media landscape has opened doors for female athletes, visibility online remains much lower than their male counterparts. By giving female athletes and their fans a voice to be heard and a space to interact, communities are formed to debate and discuss women’s sport and to call out those voices that devalue female athletes. Social media communities have the power to send messages to the eyes of millions of users, a power with potential for both positive and negative repercussions.

Such positive change has been observed in the “body positivity” movement seen on Instagram in the last decade. The movement developed as a response to the “constant barrage of media images promoting unrealistic and unattainable appearance ideas” (Cohen, 2021). Social media platforms, specifically Instagram, popularized the movement. Posts include images of “diverse body sizes and appearances that are otherwise underrepresented in mainstream accounts” with captions that promote “body acceptance and seeing beauty in diverse appearances and internal attributes” (Cohen, 2021). Content analyses of body positive Instagram posts in 2019 found that almost one-third (32%) of the images including humans “depicted bodies in extremely or very revealing clothing” and just over one-third (34%) featured objectification (Cohen, 2021). Despite persisting sexualized undertones in media, research on the effects of viewing body-positive images on young women shows a positive response. Results found that “brief exposure to body-positive posts was associated with improvements in young women’s positive mood, body satisfaction and body appreciation,” relative to thin-ideal and appearance-neutral images (Cohen, 2021). This evidence supports points we have already touched on. First, images matter and have a measurable impact on the viewer’s health. Secondly, negative images aren’t the only impactful ones. Research on body positive media images shows a positive impact on the mental health of young women, both involved in athletics and not. Social media can
provide a space for positivity, love and self-confidence and as a way to connect these sentiments with women all over the world. It also enables young women to “craft and control their own representations in ways that counter stereotypical images of women in sport media” and “challenge the presumed ‘natural’ associations between masculinity and sport” (Heinecken, 2015 as cited in Thorpe, 2017). Self-representation on social media also opens the doors for female athletes to connect with brands to represent, often becoming the “face” of a product or organization.

Branding is another avenue where women’s bodies can become a selling point for companies; female athletes are used as “mannequins” to sell whatever popular product they choose to represent. Playing off third wave feminism once again leads us to believe that by choosing what brands to work with, these female athletes are “reclaiming” their personal brands. Realistically, many of these brands are employing the same tactics as those commentating on athletic events by using athletes’ bodies for views and profit. Take the 1999 World Cup for example. Following the United States massive win against China, US player Brandi Chastain took off her jersey in celebration of her game winning goal. She was pictured celebrating on her knees with her jersey in hand (Hull et al., 2015). The win was monumental for both the evolution of female sports and the way the public responded to a shirtless female athlete. The picture of Chastain in her sports bra became an iconic image, appearing on the covers of several major publications, including Sports Illustrated, Newsweek, and USA Today (Hyman, 1999 as cited in Hull et al., 2015). The following fashion season, sales of sports bras doubled, with Chastain’s celebration cited as the major reason (Longman, 2003 as cited in Hull et al., 2015). Here we see how influential branding can be on both the sport of soccer and on the image of a player like Chastain in the pre-social-media era.
ESPN Films and espnW released a documentary as part of their “Nine for IX” series in 2013, diving deep into the impact of sex and sexualized imagery on the personal branding of female athletes. The episode, titled “Branded,” showed interviews with various current and former elite female athletes and members of the business and media side of athletics. Tennis player Chrissie Evert said of her rise into a marketing icon, “Whether you like it or not, the feminine women athletes were the only ones that got the endorsements” (SBJ.com, n.d.). The documentary examined former tennis player Anna Kournikova’s use of her sex appeal to market herself. Executive Editor of Sports Illustrated Jon Wertheim said of Kournikova, “other athletes before [Kournikova] had used sexuality, but not to the point where it really became the centerpiece of her whole marketing strategy. We had never had a package like this...[she] certainly got eyeballs on tennis that wouldn’t have been there and that helped everybody” (SBJ.com, n.d.). Leverage Agency Founder & CEO Ben Sturner compared the demand for Kournikova to a stock in a potentially massive company. “At that time, she was on the top of any sports marketers’ list for an endorsement deal. Like the stock market, you could get someone at the right time and Anna Kournikova could have been the next Google or the next Apple or the next any kind of company that would take off in a big way. But she lost (on the court). She lost a lot and she kept losing and that’s tough” (SBJ.com, n.d.). Kournikova is not the only athlete who has profited from a curated image instead of her accomplishments on the court. Branding has the power to launch female athletes with more traditional characteristics of femininity into the spotlight regardless of talent level. Former player agent Leonard Armato referred to a female athlete’s “currency” as “how attractive she is, that’s really the bottom line” (SBJ.com, n.d.).

Former Olympic gold medalist Mary Lou Retton laid out two categories female athletes fall into within their marketing: “Wholesome, all-American squeaky-clean or sexy vixen. Why is
Our society today like that? Why do women have to be like that and the men don’t?” Former Olympic soccer player Hope Solo added that male athletes “can make their entire living based off their skill” (SBJ.com, n.d.). The message, again, is clear: play the game, but make it sexy.

What Have We Learned?

From mandatory bikini uniforms to magazines filled with naked athletes, the evidence shows that female athletes have been through a lot, and a lot of performing that has nothing to do with their sports performance. It is easy to look at women’s sports and focus on progress made rather than persistent issues. What about the women of the Norwegian National Handball Team? In 2022, they were granted the right to wear “shorts tight pants with a close fit.” That was two months ago. What about Serena Williams? One of, if not the, most dominant tennis players in the world was banned for her clothing choices because it didn’t reflect the *image* her sport wanted to see.

I hope this paper made you stop and think about the women in your lives. Maybe you know some that have been involved in athletics, and maybe not. Unfortunately, body image issues are experienced by women from all backgrounds, athletics or not. My work here has been to describe the unique position of female athletes. Their experience is a microcosm of much larger issues. As I state above, the way we view women’s bodies directly reflects the values of the world around us and directly shapes how we see ourselves. How have the women in your life been affected by the societal pressures on their bodies? How has media imaging and social media played a role in their self-image? This year marks the 50th anniversary of Title IX. 50 years of female athletes not being taken seriously, fighting for every opportunity they could get. Here’s to hoping the next 50 years are filled with even more milestones for women in sports. And to hoping ESPN remembers that sex sells sex, not women’s sports.
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FIVB 2004 Beach Volleyball Uniform Regulations

Serena Williams wearing her “catsuit” at the 2018 French Open

NASCAR Driver Courtney Force on her 2013 ESPN Body Issue Cover

AAGBL Players in their Uniforms

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Tennis on the lawn at Smith College, 1883

Tennis on the lawn at Smith College, 1883 [Photograph found in Smith College Archives]. (2006). In When the girls came out to play: The birth of American Sportswear (p. 54). Amherst, MA.
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*Tennis on the lawn at Smith College, 1883* [Photograph found in Smith College Archives]. (2006). In *When the girls came out to play: The birth of American Sportswear* (p. 54). Amherst, MA.
