MEDIA PROMOTION OF WOMEN'S SPORTS

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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In this Olympic year, presidential nominees aren't the only media game in town. Athletes like Mary Decker, Sports Illustrated's 1983 "Sportswoman of the Year", and gold medal skier Debby Armstrong, have muscled their way onto magazine covers and respectable television and print coverage. The visibility of role models is perhaps the most obvious benefit of widespread promotion of women's sports. Yet financial success, increased participation, and status for these sports all hinge on the symbiotic relationship between sport and media.

At the New Agenda conference on the future of women's sports last November in Washington, D.C., "Promotion and Public Acceptance for Women's Sports" was one of six major issues addressed. Recognizing the fantastic opportunities at this time to focus attention on the woman athlete, a network of sponsors, coaches, athletes, promoters, sports information directors, and sports fans resolved to actively seek greater media coverage.

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So how do women's sports and athletes obtain more media coverage? First of all, they have to understand the medium, and its economic basis.

"Programming decisions are based on ratings, research, and what commercial sponsors are interested in," explained NBC production executive Linda Jonsson. Professional golf, for example, does not rank high in popularity with either male or female viewers, Jonsson related. But golf will always be on television because corporate sponsors like the kind of audience the game attracts.

Women's sports must also attract larger crowds to be successful media products. "The reason newspapers swarm boys' high school football and basketball games is not because the sports themselves are newsworthy, but because it's an event with 12,000 spectators - and that translates into 12,000 readers," said Jerry Lenander, national director of public relations for the AAU/USA Junior Olympics. "The market demands that they cover it."

Paula Cabot, former director of research and educational projects at the Women's Sports Foundation, and New Agenda promotion issue chair, comments that "overall sports producers do not believe that women's collegiate sports have enough of a following to feature full length broadcasts." However, Cabot points out that the NCAA's take over of women's intercollegiate athletics is a positive signal that women's sports programs could be a revenue producing commodity.

Underscoring the lack of air time devoted to women's sports is the fact that very few women are in positions of authority at the three major networks. Linda Jonsson believes that "a woman's ear would be more receptive to the offerings of women's sports." Jonsson admitted that when she was publicly hailed as the highest paid, most powerful woman in network sports, that wasn't saying much. At the three major networks there are five women sports producers out of 34; one woman director out of 27; and one woman executive vice-president out of 21.

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ABC Executive Ellie Sanger Riger was the first network woman sports producer in 1971. Over the years, Riger has witnessed the entire atmosphere of media acceptance for women's sports change tremendously. While acknowledging with regret the "dichotomy between the license allowed in news to cover human stories without regard to sex, and the actual coverage in sporting events," Riger still believes the key to promoting the achievements of women athletes is television.

"As the Olympic network ABC has been able to promote and make household names of Micki King, Peggy Fleming, Dorothy Hamill, Olga, and Nadia. We've never had the opportunity to promote team sports though because, quite frankly, until Title IX, there wasn't any competition worth covering."

According to Riger though, the exposure of the 1984 Olympics will be a major boost to women team sports. "In Los Angeles with 175 hours of air time to fill we'll have to cover them because grassroot interest and athletes such as basketball player Cheryl Miller will demand coverage."

Both Riger and Jonsson strongly believe that an increase of self-confident women commentators on the air is essential to promote the excellence and notoriety of women athletes. At the New Agenda conference Riger revealed the exciting news that ABC Vice President Jim Spence is "committed to develop as a major breakthrough, a woman play-by-play announcer who is capable, expert, respected, and totally confident at being one of the top football, baseball, or basketball play-by-play announcers." Riger cautions that it won't happen overnight. "Once we discover the talent a year's training is absolutely invaluable. ABC will also promote her to the point that when she goes on the air the public will be ready for her and she will be ready for the public. Obviously," Riger adds, "these women won't just do women's sports and by reflection as role models, the whole respect for women in the sports arena will grow."

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The growth of cable television, especially ESPN, as a major vehicle for publicizing women's sports is indicative of this new acceptance. Sports fans can switch on ESPN to see event coverage with freelance broadcaster Leandra Reilly doing play-by-play as well as catch feature stories on "Sportswomen" with Randi Hall.

"ESPN doesn't slop women's sports into ten minute anthology pieces," said Reilly. We give the women two hour productions. We tape the entire synchronized swimming, Division II swimming, diving, and equestrian events. We give them the same amount of time in a show without snipping it down and saying, 'Well, it's just the women - let's use a ten minute highlight and show you the best one. Granted ABC, CBS, and NBC only have two days a week for sports while ESPN has seven days a week to play with sports. That definitely has to be considered," she said.

"Conversely, you have your local market stations that do not do that much in the syndication business. I'm sure everyone this year has seen a half-hour or one hour preview on the football season or college basketball - who's going to win the NCAA?" "Well," Reilly demanded, "who's doing something for the women?"

To help raise the consciousness of the networks women must join the ranks of executives, producers, and on-air commentators. To feel this void, the Women's Sports Foundation has resolved to act as a clearinghouse for audition video cassettes of working female sports commentators, and also promote college programs and internships.

Women also have to start to more carefully monitor how their sport is treated by the media, and to complain or praise accordingly. If, for example it bothered you that ABC didn't ask Nancy Lopez to commentate at the 1983 U.S. Open women's golf championship which took place at her college course in Tulsa and she was pregnant and not competing and no other women broadcasters were used, then you should have voiced your displeasure to the network.

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"Women need to learn to complain effectively," Jonsson asserted. "Sometimes women almost feel they should be grateful for the jobs they get. They don't complain. They don't want to rock the boat. But I tell you - networks respond to pressure. Remember, television and the print media are a business, and they'd be out of business very quickly if they lost their audiences. It's to their benefit to keep you happy. So please let them know how you feel about the exposure women athletes are receiving. Write a letter. Encourage your whole team and their families to write - 'Hey, we don't like the way you handled the opening of the NCAA women's basketball championships. We think it really stinks. You would have never done that for the men.'

"The networks read these letters and they get scared thinking these people aren't going to watch. I know, I've been there. If enough pressure is exerted, you'll see results."

In order to effectively deliver their message to the medium, it is critical that women in sport learn more about public relations.

"You can't pass a law and say the media has to cover your event," explained AAU Public Relations Director Jerry Lenander. "That's not the reality of the whole sport/media situation. It's the responsibility of the people running the program first to inform and hand-feed the media."

In amateur sports where the main goal of attracting media coverage is to increase participation, Lenander says that public relations must be put into the mix along with practice time, uniforms, and transportation.

"It should be written into the genes of every coach and sports information director that public relations is an important part of their job, and for them not to see it as an intrusion and something they do at their will."

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Lenander, who gained easier access to the media and greater visibility for the grassroots AAU/USA Junior Olympics program through the use of former Junior Olympians Kurt Thomas, divers Jennifer Chandler and Phil Boggs, and Willye White as spokespersons, advises all sports to "take advantage of all available resources. Package your sport in a professional manner and lay out the story for the media."

Media acceptance of women's sports came a long way in the 1970's when Virginia Slims sponsored the women's professional tennis circuit from 1971-1982. Billie Jean King and Chris Evert became the first women to be named Sports Illustrated's "Sportswomen of the Year." Prize money and attendance grew at women's events. In 1983, a new "package" was unveiled to the public - The Virginia Slims World Championship Series. As a service to the sports media, the SlimStat system, a computer based system offering the most comprehensive information available on women player was also introduced.

The secret to the success of women's tennis, according to Ellen Merla, director of marketing communications for Virginia Slims, was being able to communicate to the public and the media what tennis was all about.

"We really did go out and sell a concept," stressed Merla. "We were lucky to have a great athlete like Billie Jean King who could communicate her vision to the world, but you don't always have superstars. You can still accomplish the same goals though if you're willing to educate the media."

"Image" and the personalized angle are attractive selling points to the media. Women should take advantage of that approach, said Jonsson, and not feel threatened by it.

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"In general, I don't think that men deny that image is everything, and sometimes women pretend it really isn't important, and they overreact and fight the fact that we are women," she said.

"Newspaper reporters tell me they talk to coaches of women's teams and the coaches will say, 'Well, I really don't want you to talk to her because it will make the rest of the team feel bad.' You can't refuse exposure! If that one member of a team by sheer force of personality can interest viewers into her story, and they tune in to watch that sport and somehow get hooked on it then everything snowballs."

In 1978 Nancy Lopez was a stroke of great fortune for the often overlooked LPGA. As a rookie sensation the charismatic Lopez graced the covers of Sports Illustrated and The New York Times Magazine and drew thousands of first-time spectators to LPGA tournaments.

Former professional tennis player Mary Carillo, who commentates for USA Network and contributes to World Tennis magazine, compared the importance of personalities in sports with another entertainment field.

"It's like if there was a play on Broadway that I wouldn't particularly want to see, but if Lauren Bacall or Katherine Hepburn was in it - someone I cared about, and had grown up with, and I knew what they were all about I'd want to go to see them - and that can happen in women's sports too."

"Peggy Fleming was my idol. I wanted to know all about her. Olga Korbut sold gymnastics to girls in this country, and in this Olympic year it will happen again."

It happened with Jennifer Chandler at the 1976 Olympics when she became the youngest diver to receive a gold medal. Active promotion, however, says Chandler, is not the responsibility of Olympic athletes while competing.

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"The only responsibility the athlete has is to train and to do the best that he or she can do. That's hard enough," emphasized Chandler, who is a member of the Olympic Spirit Team and an AAU/USA Junior Olympics spokesperson for Sears. "The excellence of their performance should merit media coverage. After athletes retire they owe something to their sport, not necessarily full-time. We've all struggled. We all have something we can contribute back into the sport."

On the professional level, however, the sentiment is that athletes need to greater recognize their role in promoting their sport. "We who are sponsors and publicists can only create the venue," maintained Ellen Merla. "You as athletes have to make the sell. It's not enough to just go out and run your race or pick up your racquet; or swing a bat. You have another obligation. You have to promote yourself. Don't depend on other people to do it."

Mary Carillo considers Chris Evert Lloyd the "all-time star at recognizing just what her role is, and she wasn't always that way. When she first showed up on the tour as a 16-year-old high school student with hoop earrings, she really didn't know what was happening. She had all this publicity dumped on her and she was reticent and shy and gave monosyllable answers to important questions. Then she grew up. At this point to my mind Chris is a dream. As a role model for younger players coming up, as an entertainer, as someone who gives back to the press."

If athletes expect more from the communications business they have to increase their proficiency in communicating with the media. "Reach inside yourself as athletes," stressed Merla. "Why are you out there? What makes you want to get up everyday and to compete? Tell people about it. It's interesting. It adds dimension to you as human beings. That's what the media needs to know, and they need to know it in an interesting way and they will write about it."

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"They are your friends. They need you to share the information with them."

In today's age of teen-age tennis superstars, it seems incredulous to recall that the public really never heard about Billie Jean King until she was in her late twenties. One only has to think of Carling Bassett, Andrea Yaeger, Tracy Austin and Chris Evert to appreciate the fantastic opportunities created by leaders such as Billie Jean King and Virginia Slims.

Billie Jean King is far from complacent however. At the New Agenda conference at which no other professional tennis players were in attendance, King expressed concern that the younger players are "losing sight of the big picture." At a press conference following a doubles victory at the Virginia Slims of Chicago last February, King again divulged her misgivings over the way she has seen players looking at the sport in the last few years. Particularly upsetting to King were players who were building their schedules around the Grand Slam tournaments and not the Virginia Slims circuit.

"The players owe it to themselves, the sponsors, and the people who risk every week for them day in and day out to think of their schedule first as a Virginia Slims schedule and not a Grand Slam one. Cause I have news for you. The Grand Slams never cared about us in the old days. They never would have come around for us and raised their prize money or made us important or anything if it had not been for Virginia Slims.

"So I get really irritated when the players don't support the Virginia Slims circuit the most," said King, whose company "Kingdom Inc." promoted the Chicago stop. "That should be their first concern, because that's the reason Martina Navratilova has six-and-a-half-million dollars in her pocket, and that's the reason Chris Evert Lloyd has five-and-a-half-million, and that's the reason players who the public will never know will make over a million dollars in tennis."

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"Our common goal is to sell women's tennis and to make it the best possible product we can put out there on the court" King told reporters. "Things just don't happen. You have to make them happen. We're professional people and it's our business. If the players don't worry about it now, there may be no future for them."
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