

**Women in Sports: Are we focusing on their bodies or their athletic ability when selling magazines?**

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From female athletes to female sports reporters, women in sports still do not receive the same recognition as men. Think about it ... the MLB, NFL, NBA and even PGA are still heavily male populated sports. In the 1992 film, *A League of Their Own*, a professional all-female baseball league is formed during World War II. However, it is stated that these women are only playing widely televised baseball until the men return from the war. When you turn on a baseball game (for example, Detroit Tigers because I reside in the Metro Detroit area), you are not watching women go to bat or slide to the third base. The majorly televised games are exclusively male athletes. They are not dressed inappropriately, and the camera does not zoom in on particular parts of their body. You are watching a game the same way you would at the ballpark. Coverage in magazines and other publications is also tasteful. They are either portrayed in action or posed with a particular item from their sport (i.e. a baseball bat.) When it comes to athletes like Lindsey Vonn, it is clear that she is fully dressed, similar to her male counterparts, and holding ski poles. Did we learn something from the film where women were “required” to wear skirts instead of pants when playing baseball? Possibly. However, is Lindsey’s pose still suggesting something? Let’s discuss.

**1) Did Sports Illustrated do something ethically wrong in running the Vonn picture as they**

**did?** It was argued that A.J. Kitt was captured in a similar pose on the January 27, 1992 edition of *Sports Illustrated*. However, he was also shown “in action.” His helmet was on, his head was down, and he was taking on that hill with everything he had. Lindsey Vonn was not in action; her helmet was off, her hair was perfect and she had a big smile on her face. It made it look like she was a model “posing” as an athlete. If it is not her beautiful smile, your attention could be drawn to her backend due to what appears to be a sexual pose. I think that Ms. Vonn should have been portrayed in exactly the same way as her male counterpart, A.J. Kitt. She should have had a helmet on and head down. The focus would have been more on her athletic ability. I am not going to say that some men would not be drawn to her

figure since she is also wearing a skin-tight ski suit, but you cannot always help that. Some men will try to find sex any way they can.

**2. If they did, would it matter what their actual intentions behind running the photo were?** Even if it is intended to draw attention to a female athlete and possibly increase female subscribers, I think they went about it the wrong way. I agree with the idea of self-confidence for women. You want her to be an attractive addition, that is fine. However, you should not show her sexually posed. As publications, I feel that you should use your best judgment and always stay focused on the image you are trying to portray. Unfortunately, Serena Williams was also “sexually posed” on the December 21, 2015 edition of Sports Illustrated, with her leg positioned over the arm of the chair wearing high heels. Although this could give this impression that she is a woman in charge, the focus is definitely on her exposed legs and “open” position. I have to give credit to the gender-neutral headline though, “Sportsperson of the Year.” Sadly, there are many other examples for Serena Williams, putting the focus on exposed legs wearing high heels.

**3. If this cover actually increased interest in female competitive skiing, would that make an ethical difference?** Sex sells, right? I guess it really depends on the reason why interest sparked for female competitive skiing. To ogle female athletes or to actually enjoy the sport. It is a slippery slope.

**4. What reasons would you give to defend the decision to run the Vonn photo?** If you really need to run this image, I think that appropriate ad copy is necessary. I think that a sub headline could be, “Meet the Woman Behind the Helmet.” That could justify displaying her without a helmet, facing the camera. In addition, you are focusing on “advertising” her athletic ability and empowering women. For example, think about how Ronda Rousey was portrayed on the cover of

the May 18, 2015 edition of *Sports Illustrated*. “RONDA ROUSEY IS THE WORLD’S MOST DOMINATE ATHLETE, [ARM] BAR NONE.” It does not focus on her gender, nor is she positioned in a provocative way. In fact, her stance and her expression show that she is not a force to be reckoned with. I will not get started on the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition because that portion of the publication is intended to show women in bathing suits, which would be a completely different discussion.

5. **Is the selection of cover photos, such as the Vonn shot, an important activity of sports journalists?** We have heard the phrase “Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover.” However, in the case of magazines, your cover shot is what leads people to pick up your publication in the first place. Another common phrase is a “Picture is Worth a Thousand Words,” so the image must support the content. I think that sports journalists should have a say in the final images selected to support their story, but it should go beyond just one person. More to come in later responses.

6. **Or are these purely business decisions?** I think it is a business decision that goes along with the look/feel of the publication. However, when you are talking about a person’s image, these matters should be taken delicately. This applies to men, women and minorities.

7. **Are there more ethical issues than simply covering sports once sports journalists become part of a business such as Sports Illustrated?** Show me the facts and be aware of your audience. You are not just simply covering a story; you are painting a picture with your words. Your words help dictate support imagery and placement in a publication. Sports journalists need to be aware of the tone they are setting. If a man is writing a story about a woman, he needs to be aware of his subject and the audience that will receive his story. The same applies to a woman writing a story about a man. The focus should remain on the subject’s athletic ability and performance, not on their appearance, unless it adds support to the story (i.e. their build or weight class.)

**8. How would you have handled the selection of the Vonn photo for the cover if you ran**

**Sports Illustrated?** When you give credit to a photographer, I think you should also give credit to a selection committee. If a selection committee exists, you should make sure that the committee is equally balanced. For example, 4 men and 4 women would be part of the photo selection based on what is presented. In the photo credit section, you could put "Image by: <name>, Approved and Selected by: <names.> If a woman reads the publication and sees this disclaimer, it may soften the perception and response.

**9. What values would guide your decisions?** The values to guide my decisions for sports journalism would be consistency, equality, respect, and reliability. I will break each one of them down. For consistency and equality, portraying both men and women in the same light at all times. For respect, showing respect for our subjects is crucial. Many children look up to athletes and if they feel they are represented in an appropriate manner, it can help set the stage for how they carry themselves in the public light. For reliability, you want to be known as a publication of choice for accurate representation of their subjects and the topic. For Sports Illustrated, if the goal is to be portrayed as a publication for accurate and fair representation of male and female athletes, then the remaining values need to come into play.

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