

## Female Sport Role Models: A Content Analysis of ESPN.com

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Opportunities for girls and women to play sports have been increasing since the enactment of Title IX in 1972; however, corresponding increases in media coverage of female athletes have not kept pace (Jones, 2004; Lynn, Walsdorf, Hardin, & Hardin, 2002). The media has the power to shape not only the public's perception of athletes and teams, but also the dreams of young people who aspire to be strong and confident like their athletic role models. The scant media exposure given to women's sports leaves few opportunities for girls to see positive female athletes and coaches to emulate (Vesico, Crosswhite, & Wilde, 2003; Vesico, Wilde, & Crosswhite, 2005). The portrayal of female athletes has been studied extensively in traditional print and electronic media (Blinde, Greendorfer, & Shanker, 1991; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Cunningham, 2003; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Jones, 2004; Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Kane, 1988; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Lynn, et al., 2002; Pedersen, 2002; Rintala & Birrell, 1984; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Theberge, 1991; Theberge & Cronk, 1988; Wann, Schreder, Allison & McGeorge, 1998), but few studies have examined the coverage of women's sports on Internet websites (Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley & Ashley, 2000; Jones, 2004).

Much of the earlier research concluded that there has been differential media coverage between male and female athletes, and this was associated with a devaluation of women's sports. As increasing numbers of individuals, especially young people, look to the Internet for sports information, an investigation of the coverage of women's sports on a sports news website is warranted. Thus, this current study was undertaken to examine ESPN.com, the most widely used website for obtaining sports related news (Lefton, 2006). Specifically, this study compared coverage on the ESPN website of female and male college basketball players and coaches during the 2007 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I men's and women's basketball tournaments. The purpose of this study was to determine if website coverage of women's and men's college basketball was equitable, and by extension, if there were opportunities for young girls to see and learn about athletic female role models. A content analysis was conducted on ESPN.com between March 7, 2007 and April 5, 2007 during the NCAA basketball tournaments.

Three pages of the website were observed for this study: 1) the ESPN.com home page, 2) the Women's Basketball page, and 3) the College Basketball page (men's basketball). These pages were coded for the following variables: feature story, feature picture, spotlight section, must reads, columns and features, headlines, commentaries, video clips, polls, and chats listed. Although results revealed inequities in the amount of coverage of men's and women's basketball on the ESPN.com home page, there was some evidence to suggest the emergence of women being viewed as serious athletes. Photographs depicted female athletes in action rather than posed shots, and when comparing the individual web pages for men's and women's basketball, there were no statistically significant differences in the type or amount of media coverage. Implications for sport media professionals and organizers of women's sports will be presented.