The manner in which women's sport and female athletes are positioned, marketed, and presented by leagues, media, and sponsors has received a great deal of scholarly interest throughout the years (e.g., Hellstein, 2003; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Kane & Buysse, 2005; Shaw & Amis, 2001; Werthein, 2002). The vast majority of these works reveal a focus on female athletes' attractiveness, sexuality, and heterosexuality as a means to promote women's sport and female athletes. In the recent “body issue” of ESPN The Magazine, journalist Alyssa Roenigk states, “Execs figured out long ago that the sell for women's sports (great athletes who are great looking) is different from that for their male counterparts (great athletes in great games)” (2009, p. 110). She contends female athletes must use their sex appeal to garner public attention. However, there is evidence to suggest this perception that “sex sells” is not particularly accurate relative to sport (Cunningham, Fink, & Kenix, 2008; Kane & Maxwell, 2008; Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004). Further, there are indications that portraying female athletes in this manner diminishes public perception of their athletic ability and leads to views that women’s sports are less exciting (Angelini, 2008; Knight & Giuliano, 2002). This study seeks to extend the literature by using the match-up hypothesis and framing theory to examine how different advertisement portrayals of well-known female and male athletes will influence perceptions of the athletic event and the athletes’ athletic ability.

The match-up hypothesis suggests endorsers or spokespersons are more effective when there is a “fit” between them and the endorsed product (Kamins, 1990). For example, Till and Busler (2000) found brand attitudes toward an energy bar were more positive when the product was endorsed by an athlete than when it was endorsed by an actor. The match-up hypothesis has been explained by associative learning theory which suggests links between seemingly unrelated concepts can be produced (Till & Busler, 2000). Arrangements of concepts tied together will create an associated system of memory which will call upon related concepts every time one concept in the system is activated (Anderson, 1983; Klein, 1991). However, the link between product and endorser will be stronger when there is a more natural match between the two (Kamins, 1990; Lynch & Schuler, 1994).

Fink, et al., (2004) used the match-up hypothesis to determine the most influential characteristic of an athlete used to endorse a sporting event. They created fictitious advertisements in which a softball player was used to advertise a softball event. Their results showed expertise of the athlete was a more important predictor of the athlete/event fit than was attractiveness. Cunningham, et al., (2008) repeated the study using tennis. Their results showed an interaction -- when the female tennis player was depicted as having high levels of expertise, there was no difference in perceived athlete/event fit between the highly attractive and less attractive endorser. However, when the athlete had low expertise, the attractive athlete was perceived as more appropriate. They suggested there may be a longitudinal framing effect on the match-up hypothesis. That is, because female athletes have long been framed with a focus on their sex appeal rather than their athletic ability, attractiveness may have become part of consumers' association set for women's tennis (Cunningham, et al., 2008). However, the experiments did not include male athletes for comparison and both used a fictitious athlete. While this method allowed for greater control over possible confounding agents, it sacrificed ecological validity and limited the generalizability of the findings.

Kane & Maxwell (2008) provided further evidence that the “sex sells” notion is not entirely accurate. They conducted a qualitative study in which focus groups were shown photographs of female athletes in varying degrees of athletic versus non-athletic poses. They found as the photographs highlighted less of the athlete's athletic ability and more of her sex appeal, participants responded more negatively.

There is also evidence that differential framing of athletes impacts public perceptions. Knight and Giuliano (2002) developed fictitious newspaper articles manipulating the sport story's primary focus (athlete’s athleticism versus attractiveness). Participants had significantly less favorable impressions of both the male and female athletes when the story focused on the athlete's attractiveness. Angelini (2008) conducted a study employing both physiological and self-report measures. He showed participants men's and women's sports events and measured their
physiological arousal. Both male and female participants reported more arousal watching the men's games, however, none of the physiological tests were consistent with those reports. He suggested we have been taught for so long men's sports are more exciting that it leads to higher self reported arousal, even when it does not actually occur.

Given this background literature, we will conduct an experimental study using well-known professional tennis athletes in advertisements for a charity tennis event. The following hypotheses will be tested:

H1: Male and female athletes depicted in athletic action photographs will receive higher ratings of endorser/event fit than athletes depicted in photographs aimed at physical attractiveness or sex appeal.

H2: Endorser/event fit will positively influence attitudes toward the event.

H3: There will be an interaction effect between gender of athlete and photo type (athletic action, physical attractiveness, sex appeal) on ratings of endorser-event fit for the athletic event. The female athlete portrayed in physical attractiveness and sex appeal photos will receive higher ratings of fit than the male athlete depicted in these ways.

H4: Male and female athletes depicted in athletic action shots will receive higher ratings of overall athletic ability than those depicted in poses aimed at physical attractiveness or sex appeal.

A 3 (Photograph: athletic action; physical attractiveness {off-court dressed up}; and sex appeal {off court, scantily clothed}) X 2 (gender of athlete) X 2 (gender of participant) experimental design will be conducted. Advertisements for a charity tennis event occurring in a nearby city will be created using Andy Roddick and Maria Sharapova as player endorsers. Both tennis players are currently rated similarly and have accumulated comparable accolades as tennis players. The advertisements will use similar language describing their athletic accomplishments, only the pictures of the athletes will change. At least 180 undergraduate students at a large eastern university in the United States will serve as study participants. The hypotheses will be tested via a MANCOVA with picture type, sex of the athlete, and sex of the participant serving as the IV's; athlete attractiveness and involvement serving as the control variables; and athlete-event fit, attitudes towards the event, and athlete's overall athletic ability serving as the DV's. All dependent variable measures have been used and deemed reliable in previous research (Cunningham et al., 2008; Ohanian, 1990; Parker & Fink, 2008; Till & Bussler, 2000).

Results will be discussed relative to appropriate theory and related literature. Practical implications relative to the marketing of women's sport derived from the results will be discussed. Suggestions for future research will be forwarded.