

IMAGES OF WOMEN'S SPORT BEYOND ESTHETICS: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Nobody can deny the role that media plays in our lives in general. In the same vein, sports media, covering both men and women, have had a tremendous impact.

As a member of the media, I can say that since its early days, the media have in general been an asset to sportsmen and -women. They have helped introduce sports to interested - and in fact previously uninterested readers and viewers - and have encouraged the public to become more health conscious as more and more people take up playing some kind of sport as a pastime.

The media have helped our sports champions become world celebrities, their fame outstripping film stars and at times, upstaging even presidents and kings.

I certainly believe, and I say this tongue in cheek, that the media was quite pleased when women arrived on the sports scene to participate in serious competitions. The media have found in women quite an interesting subject as their power to attract more admirers to newspapers, magazines and TV has proven very strong. Their pictures, which adorn the glossy covers of magazines and sometimes leave little to the imagination, are these days found not just in the sports section where one would have normally found them, but everywhere: front, back and center pages. The media have turned them into mega stars and their fame, not to mention fortune, has shot up to somewhere in the stratosphere.

Media has too often portrayed women in sport in a stereotyped and trivialized

by Inas Mazhar*



manner. Of more concern to the media is looks and outward appearance. Not nearly enough focus is given to women champions beyond their esthetic qualities nor the efforts exerted and fought for in order to reach the peak of their profession. If this is what concerns the media, not to mention male spectators, it most certainly should not. Media should portray women champions as idols not by concentrating on their looks but on their talents, skills and achievements.

In a game like tennis, for example, most women have hit the big time - thanks to the media - even if the focus of attention is undeserved. A case in point is Russia's teenager Anna Kournikova, who in her short career has graced the cover of dozens of magazines, even though she has yet to win a single championship of note. She, too, is so engrossed in her appearance which stands to bring her millions in fashion and make-up deals, that it must be effectively her tennis.

Such high-profile coverage does not necessarily have the same impact on team sports; the media has many times

turned its attention to individual sports instead, giving short shrift to genuinely talented individuals who have been unable to project a true image of their worth simply because they must share whatever success they achieve with their teammates. A player in an individual sport, however, is allowed to shine, no matter whether the talent is there or not. Looks are many times, and unfortunately, the ultimate decision-maker.

We have in Egypt, for instance, Rania Elwani, one of the world's top 10 female short distance swimmers. Rania is by no means beautiful, but she is not bad looking either. And her sports uniform - a skin-tight swimming suit - would leave the door open to many comments about her overall physique. However, there has never been anything written or publicly said about Rania in Egyptian media other than her accomplishments in the pool. Perhaps the farthest any media has gone would be to ask the very innocent question as to when or whether she will get married.

The way the athletes look, how they act in their personal life and how this is portrayed in the media is not limited to women only. A famous case in point is Dennis Rodman, whose skills helped the Chicago Bulls become the basketball team of the 1990s. But Rodman's talents on the court have been far overshadowed by his off the court lifestyle and his, to say the least, bizarre and eccentric lifestyle and behavior.

It is, whether we like it or not, athletes like Rodman who are today's role models for our youth. It is they whom our teenagers look up to. Our would-be Navratilovas, Jordans and Lewis' are concentrating not just on becoming

champions and gold medal winners in their respective sports but on emulating their idols - in the hope of becoming just like them - in every facet of their lives, be it good or bad. It is unfortunate that the latter many times supersedes the former. We would much rather prefer that a sports hero be a clean-cut, clean living exponent of the game, somebody who looks and acts just like the proverbial girl or boy next door. Realistically, though, this is not the case and will probably never be.

If we are to explore the reasons for this state of affairs, one would have to look no further than the media as the biggest culprit. If it was not for our TV, magazines and newspapers, such athletes whose good looks and some-

times wayward personal style would never have had the forum, a stage, from which to perform before the world. We in the media are helping to create what we publicly say we do not like. I daresay that had our media not been so possessed with shining the spotlight on how great some women athletes look, the athletes themselves would not, in turn, be so obsessed with their appearance.

I come from Egypt, which is Arab and Islamic. We have a heritage and traditions which have been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. Needless to say, women sports have come under scrutiny in Egypt and in the region as a whole. Women must and are forced to

either retire from a sport early in life or not take up sports at all. The reasons are varied. Either because they must get married early, or are frightened away by what is considered unseemly muscles that may be built upon their frame, or because of religion. You know the adage, *"Children should be seen and not heard"*. Here, in the Middle East, many, many women should be neither heard nor seen and certainly never on a court, field or pool. Whatever the reasons, the results are the same. Women has-beens in sports, coupled with those who never made it, can only lead to a deterioration of sports, many times threatening the very future of certain games.

These conceptual taboos are changing surely but slowly. In our society the media have fought for the rights of women, not just in sport but in all aspects of life. They have succeeded to an extent and the percentage of the number of women practising sports has increased. But it is an uphill battle in which success is measured in ounces as opposed to the tons of problems and obstacles that remain rock hard.

Some members of the media here have tried to tackle the problem head-on and have probably learned a thing or two from women's soccer which has seen its popularity grow by leaps and bounds during and after last summer's football World Cup in the United States. It is a fact that frequent and regular media coverage of women's soccer in the past few years have helped it to become an official sport. Noteworthy in this respect that in Egypt we have introduced a women's football league which has been getting coverage, albeit irregular.

In Egypt, our conservatism, both in our media and athletes, has helped focus attention on what should be focussed on. May I be so bold as to say that in my country, beauty, as far as we are



Fatuma Roba, Olympic champion in the marathon in Atlanta in 1996, under the flashes of the photographers.

concerned, is only skin deep. Inside us all is a much bigger wealth that the media constantly tries to nurture.

It's fine to look pretty and if God has granted it, even beautiful. What is not so fine is to make a big deal out of it. Among several other negative aspects, this can only hurt truly great athletes who are simply not endowed with God-given beauty. It is a point to consider. Natural beauty is a gift; it is not earned. Great sportsmen and women must sweat to reach the top of their profession. That is where the real glory lies.

If women sports at a global level are progressing and spectator interest increasing in the world, it's safe to say that women in the media have definitively helped. Several sportswomen, after retiring, have signed on to work for TV stations as commentators and

newspapers as reporters, fields once entirely dominated by men.

Seeing a women journalist or even a photographer on a sports field is now a familiar sight. Not too long ago, they were looked upon as intruders on the field. At the start of my career, I was only Half-jokingly told by male colleagues to find myself another job where I would need only to sit at a desk and go home to my parents or my husband by midday. Some even suggested I quit altogether, get married and have children. I did not take the advice. For the next nine years, I worked in sports and was, I believe, able to make a name for myself of sorts. I recently married, and I did not take this step until I was sure I had found a broad-minded and understanding individual. He is a typical Eastern male, but he supports me

and has nothing but praise for my achievements.

Women journalists in Egypt have proven themselves, if not in covering male events, then in at least fighting for women's sports and trying to spread women sports through reporting and covering them in detail, stressing on their more serious aspects such as training methods.

In the last decade, not only in my country but the world over, few women have managed to make significant inroads in sports media. Now, that is rapidly changing. From my tours all over the world and having attended several international events, I have seen this for myself. One example can be found in the 1998 World Cup in France. Male members of the media as well as fans in the stands were surprised to see a veiled woman photographer on the field. She was an Iranian Muslim. Neither her society nor her religion prevented this woman from working and trying to prove herself.

In Egypt, in the early 1990s there were only four women members in the Sports Journalists Association - along with 170 male colleagues. Now, we are 12 women registered in the association, not to mention women freelancers not officially registered.

I believe that if women sports journalists are to succeed they should work for it, fight for it in order to prove themselves. No one is going to fight on their behalf. It is they, and they alone, who must carve a niche for themselves among their male counterparts. I can assure you, as my experience attests, they will be most welcome. These women are taking on a huge responsibility as they continue to fight what they, and enlightened members of our society, believe is right.

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Exchange of views between the participants.