

Skimpy female sports coverage

# LESS IS MORE

by Laurel Hyatt  
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Charlatan

"She's the sort of Scandinavian blonde that makes you pine for the fjords."

This isn't a passage from a steamy romance novel set in an exotic European playground. It's a description of the skip of Norway's Olympic women's curling team that appeared on the sports pages of a Canadian daily newspaper. This kind of women's sports coverage nauseates some people.

"It's a blatant example of inappropriate coverage of male-female sport in newspapers," said Diana Palmason, manager of the federal Fitness and Amateur Sport women's program.

Palmason was referring to an article written by a male reporter. The headline implied that the article described the gold medal won in Calgary by the Canadian women's curling team skipped by Linda Moore. But Canada's victory was buried in the twentieth paragraph, taking a back seat to the attractiveness of the Norwegian skip who lost to Moore.

"It's hard to imagine Trine Trulsen looking better than she does today," the newspaper article wrote about the skip. It also talked about her favourite hobby, knitting.

The mainstream media's emphasis of female athletes' attractiveness and disregard of their athletic accomplishments infuriates women's sports authorities. They say the media largely ignore female sports on all levels — amateur, varsity, and professional. When women's sports are covered, the authorities say the articles are sexist and portray women as sex objects who take up sports as a diversion or an opportunity to writhe around in skimpy outfits.

"The day is gone when only professional sports were covered," says Andrew Boyle of C100. What our sports department covers is what the public wants to hear. This week, the public was interested in the CIAU men's basketball championships."

Patricia Forrest of Dalplex Athletics and Recreational Services said, "Female sports coverage is good. We publicize both male and female sports equally, but I think university varsity sports could get better coverage."

According to statistics from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, male athletes outnumber females by two to one, so just by sheer numbers males would be more visible in varsity sports.

But a representative from a local TV station who declined to be identified said, "My understanding is that we cover all

sports, both male and female. The only problem I can see is that we often don't cover male figure skating."

Boyle said, "I think the problem lies in the promotion of female sports, and no one seems to call in their scores."

The injustices to women athletes go beyond the media's failure to report scores from organized sports. Athletics encompasses physical activity from jogging to aerobics, says Danette Steele, managing director of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport.

Women on television aerobics shows are portrayed as "people who are obsessed with exercise for a body beautiful," Steele says. The women on the show represent the image the viewer is supposed to achieve: skinny.

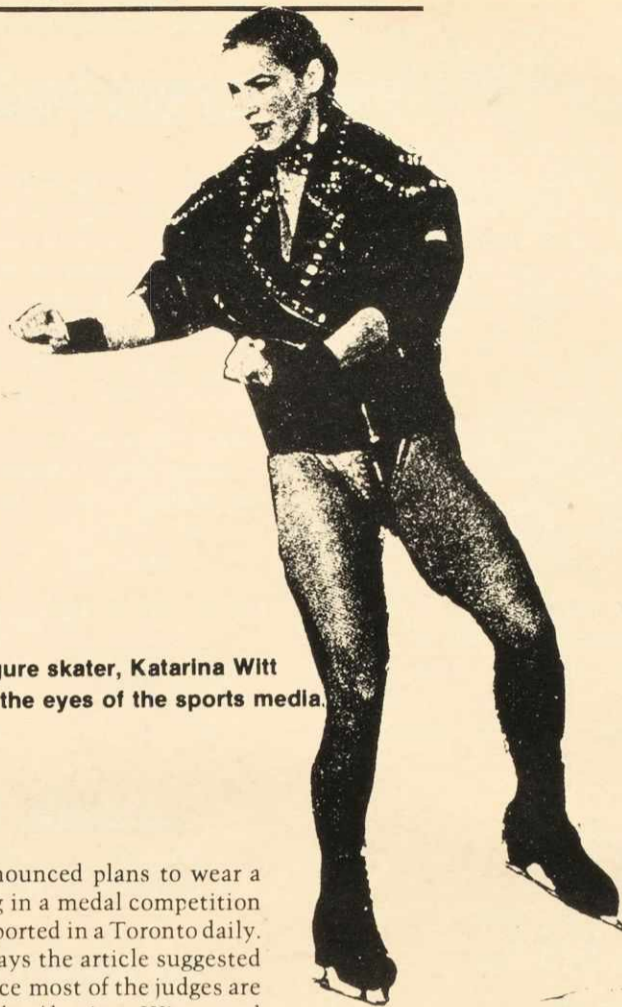
"The media are very important agents for reproducing social roles," Steele says, citing the idea that women exercise to be more attractive to men. Women work out to feel good about themselves, she says. But the media portrayal of women's exercise stems from "the male system where women are participating in fitness to get thin rather than how they can draw on their strength."

A Ph.D. study done on the TV show *The 20-minute Workout* found that the program was designed not to promote exercise for women, but to please a male audience, says Palmason. She adds that the video "focussed only on the hips or chest" of the female aerobics instructors, and viewers "don't even know what they're supposed to do" because the camera didn't show enough of the instructors for the viewers to be able to make out the exercises.

"The 20-minute Workout is nothing less than soft-core porn," says Palmason. "A woman in a tight, brief leotard cut up to her waist doesn't fit 95 per cent of women walking on the street and misrepresents physically active women."

The skimpy outfits of Olympic figure skates also drew media attention, especially the outfits of East Germany's Katerina Witt.

Sexy figure skater, Katarina Witt catches the eyes of the sports media.



Her announced plans to wear a G-string in a medal competition were reported in a Toronto daily. Steele says the article suggested that since most of the judges are male, they'd give Witt good marks because of her appearance.

"Here they are, focussing on how this woman dresses. It was totally absurd," Steele says.

The fact that women's Olympic figure skating has been widely promoted doesn't surprise Steele. She adds that sports considered sexy and feminine, like skating and gymnastics, are considered not only appropriate but desirable for women to participate in and read about.

But sports like judo and hockey are considered taboo for women and don't get coverage, Steele says. "Judo is a contact sport and it's very unladylike."

The media don't want to change the status quo and report non-traditional women's sports, adds Palmason. "You certainly don't want to have a picture of a woman that doesn't fit the stereotyped idea of what's appropriate for girls and women in physical activity."

Steele believes male-dominated sports pages are rooted in sexual insecurity: men want to read about macho sports to prove they're not gay. "I've never seen an area that is as homophobic as sport," she says.

The media have a job to reflect

what their readership wants, but Steele questions whether this is done well. "Are the media giving the public what the public wants? Why is it in their best interest to reinforce stereotypical roles where women have less power?"

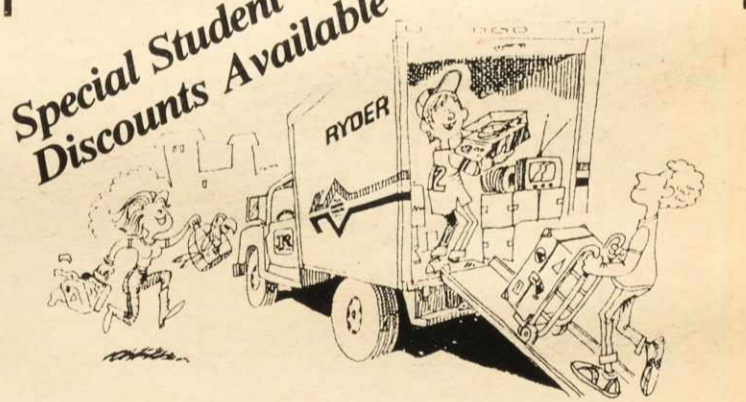
But Palmason says female readers want to read about their colleagues' athletic accomplishments. "Women are saying, 'Why don't we see the results?'"

If women are to be encouraged to participate in sports, the incentive won't be coming from the media, say Steele and Palmason. "The media are extremely powerful," Steele says. "The images women are seeing of themselves are fitting back into the typical patterns of male domination in our society."

Women's groups are fighting strong ideas that women's sports are unimportant. It's going to take a long time before coverage of female athletics is side by side with that of male athletics, adds Palmason. "We can change certain behaviour, but to change the attitudes behind them is the real goal."

— with Dale Rissesco —

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