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Women, Sport and the Media: A Complex Terrain

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As we move into the 21st century, sport appears to be everywhere. Across the world, billions of viewers tune into television broadcasts of global events like the Olympic Games and soccer or rugby world cups. In New Zealand we can access a smorgasbord of media coverage of sport via television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the internet and even mobile phones. We have news, live sport, talk-back, previews and reviews, comedy and game shows, video games and fantasy sport competitions. Sport appears on free-to-air stations like TV1, TV3, Prime and Maori TV and via pay-TV on Sky's range of dedicated sports channels. We are enveloped in *mediasport*, a term that encompasses any media coverage that appears in the mainstream mass media.

Yet the overwhelming male focus of this coverage is seldom questioned. The association between sport and masculinity is so taken for granted that few people challenge the fact that media coverage is heavily weighted in favour of men. The world of sports journalism is also male-dominated: a recent telephone survey of 28 newspapers and the New Zealand Press Association identified only five female full-time sports reporters, less than 10% of the total (Bruce, 2007; see also Ferkins, 1992b; Strong & Hannis, 2006).

Moreover, those who speak out against the media's focus on male sport struggle to have their concerns taken seriously. Indeed, studies that demonstrate gender imbalances are "persistently rejected as irrelevant" and the results "often ignored or trivialised" by media workers (Fountaine & McGregor, 1999, p. 113; McGregor, 2000). Yet female athletes and their advocates are only asking for what

male athletes receive on a regular basis. As McGregor (2006) points out:

The main thing women want from the media is to be in it. We don't just want to be firsts, bests and onlys, sex symbols, wives, mothers or victims. We want to be recognised in both our complexity and diversity.
(p. 30)

In this chapter I examine coverage of women's sport, exposing the ways in which the sports media can simultaneously challenge and reinforce dominant assumptions that sport is primarily a male domain. I first summarize the extensive research that shows how the 'everyday' sporting activities of female athletes are trivialised and ignored by mediasport, before turning to a discussion of the times and places when female athletes visibly enter into public consciousness. Finally, I present examples from two case studies; one which disrupts and one which supports traditional ways of understanding gender. The discussion is underpinned by an assumption that media coverage matters because it has the potential to strongly influence our ideas (see Lines, 2000). As Kirk (1993) argues:

Media culture is not merely consumed and discarded, but is utilised to construct personal identities ... the material the media supplies is not passively absorbed, but is actively appropriated as the stuff of people's sense of self, their place in the social world, and the bases of their hopes and expectations of the future ...
(p. 18)

Women on the Margins: Reinforcing Assumptions of Sport as a Male Domain

There can be little doubt that media coverage establishes sport as a male domain in which women participate but mostly at the margins (Messner, Dunbar & Hunt, 2000). Overall, it is clear that mediasport presents "an essentially male-skewed world...one in which females have reason to wonder about their social position and role" (Melnick & Jackson, 1998, p. 550).

Both New Zealand and international research demonstrate that women's sport struggles for recognition in the 'everyday' coverage which makes up the bulk of mediasport reporting. In fact, international research has shown that mediasport tends to do the opposite of what women want: focusing on "firsts, bests and onlys, sex symbols, wives, mothers or victims" rather than recognising the "complexity and diversity" of female athleticism (McGregor, 2006, p. 30).

New Zealand research on everyday coverage (which includes within-nation events such as netball's annual National Bank Cup competition, 1998-2007) spans almost three decades and no matter what the time frame, year or type of media studied, the results show that males average more than 80% of coverage and females average less than 10% (see Table 1). Taken collectively, the research paints a stark picture of discrimination.

It should be noted that much of this content analysis research has been conducted from an explicit or implicit liberal feminist position which believes that once discrimination has been highlighted then it is logical that steps can be taken to end that discrimination. However, bringing discrimination to the attention of the male-dominated sports media has resulted in little long-term change, thus reinforcing Fountaine and McGregor's (1999) argument that the longitudinal research confirms "the structural inequity of press coverage" (p. 124). Further, despite all television nightly news channels featuring females as sports presenters or reporters in recent years, the percentage of female coverage appears to be steadily dropping rather than increasing (see Table 1).

Although the sports media industry has critiqued existing research as inaccurate because it might, for example, choose a week or a sporting season during which little women's sport occurred, the results are remarkably consistent despite the studies being conducted at various times of year and focusing on a range of different media.

Table 1. New Zealand everyday media coverage between 1980 and 2007

Year of Research	Media Analysed	Male % ¹	Female %	Mixed/ Neutral ² %	Source
1980	2 newspapers	83	11	6	Cooper (1981)
1980	1 newspaper	88	13	-	Patterson (cited in Cooper, 1981)
1984	1 TV news	69	13	18	O'Leary & Roberts (1984)
1987	4 newspapers	83	9	8	Aston (1987)
1987	1 Sunday newspaper	88	5	7	Media Women (cited in McGregor & Melville, 1993)
1989	2 newspapers	92	8	-	Snell (1989, cited in Ferkins, 1992b)
1989	1 TV	89	11	-	Snell (1989, cited in Ferkins, 1992b)
1991	2 newspapers	91	8	-	The Hillary Commission (cited in Ferkins, 1992b)
1992	6 newspapers	76	12	12	McGregor (1994), McGregor & Melville (1993)
1992	2 TV shows	79	9	12	McGregor (1994)
1993	1 TV news	79	9	12	Atkinson (2002)
1993	1 TV show	82	8	10	McGregor & Melville (1995)
1996	6 newspapers	80	4	16	McGregor & Fountaine (1997)
1998	6 newspapers	74	11	15	Fountaine & McGregor (1999)
2002	1 newspaper	75	14	11	Chapman (2002)
2004	1 newspaper	82	13	4	Alexander (2004)
2005	1 TV news	95	3	2	Shanks (2005)
2007	4 newspapers	86	5	9	Chapman (2007)
Average		83	9	10 ³	

¹ All percentages have been rounded to whole numbers.

² This column contains mixed coverage of both men and women and neutral coverage of stories such as reports on security preparations, doping controls and the status of various stadia.

³ The Average is calculated only across those studies that included this category. As a result the Average columns total more than 100%.

This consistency reinforces the fact that “in general, journalists who cover sport have an inaccurate perception of the amount of women’s sport presented to readers” (Fountain & McGregor, 1999, p. 124).

Given that most sports media have historically done little market research, media perceptions and decisions about who and what gains coverage tend to be made on the basis of intuition, anecdotal evidence, what has been done in the past, and taken for granted beliefs about what the public want (Ferkins, 1992a; Fountain & McGregor, 1999).

Once women do receive coverage, extensive international research has shown that the media have historically used five techniques to represent women in line with cultural ideas about femininity. These are gender marking, compulsory heterosexuality, appropriate femininity, infantilisation and downplaying sport (see Wensing & Bruce, 2003). *Gender marking* identifies men’s events as ‘the’ events and those played by females as ‘women’s’ events; *compulsory heterosexuality* highlights women as sex objects or in heterosexually-prescribed roles such as wives or mothers; *appropriate femininity* emphasises stereotypically female characteristics such as physical or emotional weakness, tears and concern for others; *infantilisation* leads to adult females being called ‘girls’ while males are more often called ‘men’; and *downplaying sport* results in a focus on women’s looks, relationships, sexual orientations and lives outside sport in ways that devalue their sporting identities (see Wensing & Bruce, 2003). More recently, research suggests that the most common form of representation is *ambivalence* – where positive descriptions and images are juxtaposed with those that trivialise women’s successes (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988).

Certainly, coverage of female athletes still often reinforces existing gender ideologies. For example, despite the world champion Black Ferns rugby team being three-time world champions, rugby magazines appear to give more visibility to naked female models body-painted in rugby team colours. Mediasport continues to present men’s sport (e.g., rugby) as *the* sport while gender-marking women’s sport (e.g., *women’s* rugby). In addition, successful female athletes who appear to fit dominant cultural ideals of femininity, heterosexuality and attractiveness tend to receive the most coverage,

such as Sarah Ulmer (cycling), Mandy Smith (Black Sticks hockey, 1990-2002), Melodie Robinson (Black Ferns rugby, 1996-2002), Adine Wilson (Silver Ferns netball), Barbara Kendall (boardsailing) and Caroline and Georgina Evers-Swindell (rowing). A study of netball suggests that media coverage from the 1960s began to sexualise the players “and reports concentrated on those deemed to be the most attractive to men, rather than on netball skill” (Nauright, 1999, p. 48). Nauright suggests that “representing netball stars in their family and (hetero)sexual roles meant that women who played were now expected to become involved in stable heterosexual relationships if they wanted to receive favourable media and public attention” (1999, p. 60). However, there is some evidence that New Zealand mediasport also celebrates ‘hard women’ who overcome pain and injury to successfully compete, and the 2002 Commonwealth Games coverage revealed a celebration of female athletes of Pākehā, Maori and Pacific heritage and, to a lesser extent, those of Asian heritage (Wensing, 2003).

Netball Versus the Rugby Codes

One measure of equality is a comparison of coverage of New Zealand’s two most popular sporting codes for each gender – netball for females and rugby union for males. While numbers of participants in each sport have remained similar, rugby has always received more coverage. However, netball has seen significant growth in media interest since the early 1980s when one study found that rugby received a remarkable 427 times more coverage (more than 1 hour and 4 minutes versus 9 seconds) (O’Leary & Roberts, 1985). At that time, media coverage of netball fell far behind men’s cricket, rugby league and soccer, as well as trailing international women’s tennis and golf (O’Leary & Roberts, 1985). Since then, netball has gradually risen to become the most covered women’s sport and recent newspaper analyses during the netball season found that the gap between rugby and netball had diminished to the point where rugby received only two to four times more coverage (Alexander, 2004; Borck, 2005). In both studies netball was the only women’s sport to appear in the top five most covered sports, ranking fourth overall (Alexander, 2004; Borck, 2005). Netball’s popularity is clear: live coverage of netball on TV1 has gained large audiences

and netball has regularly ranked in the top 20 most watched national shows since 2004. Ratings for individual matches have even outranked international All Blacks rugby tests and Olympics coverage.

Although netball's rising coverage is difficult to explain in a context where the mainstream media increasingly focus on globalised professional sport (see McGregor, 2000), its success may be related to two key factors. The first is the fact that it has not recently had to compete with rugby on TV1 which has lost broadcast rights to rugby over the last decade. The second relates to women challenging their exclusion from formerly male-dominated sports such as rugby (Nauright, 1999). Indeed, Nauright suggests that netball's "unprecedented media coverage" (p. 48) since the 1980s is a response to this challenge, and argues that "the media has played its role in propping up netball and rugby as the national women's and men's sports respectively" (1999, p. 62).

National Heroines Winning for New Zealand: Challenging Gender Ideologies

Women are also far from invisible during major sports events such as the Commonwealth and Olympic Games where nationalism comes to the fore. Indeed, recent international research has highlighted the important part that nationalism plays in determining whether or not female athletes receive media coverage (e.g., Bernstein, 2002; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Wensing and Bruce (2003) reflect a growing belief among media researchers when they argue that "coverage during international sports events ... may be less likely to be marked by gendered ... discourses or narratives than reporting on everyday sports, at least for sportswomen whose success is closely tied to a nation's sense of self" (p. 393).

The truth of this belief is borne out in New Zealand research that clearly shows that coverage of sportswomen increases from an everyday average of less than 10% to an average of 26% during major events (see Table 2).

These often dramatic increases, which were identified when researchers analysed *only* the major event coverage, show that women who win for the nation are highlighted as worthy of attention

Table 2. New Zealand coverage of Commonwealth and Olympic Games by gender

Focus & Year	Media Analysed	Male %	Female %	Mixed/ Neutral %	Source
Summer Olympics 1988	TV & newspaper	78	22	-	Scratchley (1988) ¹
Winter Olympics 1992	TV & newspaper	71	16 ²	14	Ferkins (1992a, 1992b)
Summer Olympics 1992	TV & newspaper	55	24	22	Whitaker (1993)
Commonwealth Games 2002	Newspaper	21	24	55	Wensing (2003) ³
Summer Olympics 2004	Newspaper	45	27	26	Bruce & Chapman (forthcoming)
Commonwealth Games 2006	TV & newspaper	36	38	27	Student research (cited in Bruce et al., 2007)
Commonwealth Games 2006	Newspaper	33	29	39	Chapman (2007)
Average		48	26	31⁴	

¹ Scratchley's results cover only one week of the Games.

² Ferkins' results focused on all sports news during the Winter Olympics, thus reducing the overall % for females. She found that the percentage of female Games coverage was higher than unrelated coverage.

³ Wensing's results focused only on the 73% of Olympics stories that were about New Zealand athletes. She found high levels of mixed coverage, as did Chapman (2007).

⁴ The Average is calculated only across those studies that included this category. As a result the Average columns total more than 100%.

(Bruce & Chapman, forthcoming; Bruce, Falcous & Thorpe, 2007; Chapman, 2007; Scratchley, 1988; Wensing, 2003; Whitaker, 1993). In the two most recent Commonwealth Games, women received similar or more coverage than men (Bruce et al., 2007; Chapman, 2007; Wensing, 2003). For example, focusing just on coverage of New Zealanders, women received 59% of all 2002 Games images and 24% of articles; in both cases more than males (Wensing, 2003). These findings can be explained by the fact that females won more medals than males at both the 2002 and 2006 Commonwealth

Games. Wensing's (2003) analysis demonstrates that New Zealand newspapers overwhelmingly focused on New Zealand medal winners. Thus, nationalism was more important than gender in terms of who received coverage.

This finding should not be surprising given the key role of sport in activating New Zealand nationalism (Bassett, 1984; Cosgrove & Bruce, 2005; Evans & Kelley, 2002; Melnick & Jackson, 2002). Indeed, Bassett (1984) has argued that "nationalistic fervour and patriotic pride are taken for granted in all...coverage of international sport" (p. 19). The importance of sport to New Zealanders is also evident in the plethora of sportspeople who rank highly on national surveys of most trusted New Zealanders. Historically, a sense of national identification has been built around male athletes, especially the All Blacks, but international sporting success by New Zealand women increasingly appears to be valued. For example, while athletes have dominated a national survey of most trusted New Zealanders, claiming 90% of the top 10 positions between 2005 and 2007, sportswomen hold more than half of the top 10 positions and represent almost 60% of the athletes in the top 10. The most trusted individuals are seen as sharing "the common trait of humility" (Sir Ed," 2005, para. 5). The importance of national success and media visibility is demonstrated quite clearly in that the five women who have ranked in the top 10 every year since 2005 are all Commonwealth or Olympic gold medalists or national representative netballers – cyclist Sarah Ulmer, netballer Irene van Dyk, boardsailor Barbara Kendall and rowers Georgina and Caroline Evers-Swindell – as is discus thrower Beatrice Faumuina who appeared on the 2007 list ("Sir Ed", 2005, 2006; "Who do", 2007).

The next section focuses on two cases studies that identify some of the complexities in New Zealand mediasport coverage of women. The first presents a qualitative analysis of the 2004 Olympic Games that shows how mediasport can disrupt dominant ideologies and the second focuses on the popular sports comedy show, *Sportscafe*, which operated to support cultural beliefs about femininity and masculinity. Both studies drew primarily upon the method of textual analysis which attempts to tease out the dominant or 'preferred' meanings embedded in media texts (see McKee, 2001; Turner, 1997). The focus in this method is on exploring how mainstream media texts might challenge or support dominant cultural beliefs.

We take for granted, as Turner argues, that “media texts offer especially rich opportunities to observe the cultural construction of meaning, locations where we can see the social production of ideas and values happening before our eyes” (1997, p. 326). In this study, our focus was on ideologies of gender.

Case Study 1: 2004 Olympic Games

This case study began as a textual analysis of the 2004 Olympic Games coverage in the *New Zealand Herald* (see also Bruce & Chapman, forthcoming).¹ When it became apparent that most of the female coverage was focused on New Zealand’s gold-medal winners, the analysis was expanded to include stories about Sarah Ulmer and Caroline and Georgina Evers-Swindell in other major newspapers around the country, accessed via the Newztext Plus database.

Overall, the media coverage was somewhat contradictory. While coverage of New Zealand women tended to disrupt gender ideologies, international athletes’ performances were more often covered in ways that reinforced dominant understandings of femininity. For example, international females who showed mental or physical weakness tended to receive coverage. These included two women who failed spectacularly, such as pre-race favourite and English marathoner Paula Radcliffe whose roadside collapse and post-race tears were widely publicized, and Australian Sally Robbins who was christened “Lay Down Sally” and vilified after she stopped rowing in the women’s eights final.

In contrast, the focus on New Zealand athletes related to winning. Gold medallists were the focus of the *New Zealand Herald* Games coverage, with cyclist Sarah Ulmer and rowers Caroline and Georgina Evers-Swindell being the most photographed athletes, male or female. The five women who received the most coverage were all New Zealanders and previous Olympic medallists or world champions who were expected to have a good chance of winning in 2004 – Ulmer, the Evers-Swindells, Valerie Vili (nee Adams) and Barbara Kendall (see also Bruce & Chapman, forthcoming). Ulmer and the Evers-Swindells entered the 2004 Olympics as world champions, Vili was a former junior world shot put champion and

Kendall had won boardsailing gold, silver and bronze respectively at the three previous Olympics.

Another key aspect of media coverage appears to relate to the personality characteristics of specific athletes. It is widely accepted that New Zealanders value athletes who retain and demonstrate modesty and humility despite their success (Cosgrove & Bruce, 2005; "Who do", 2007). Thus, male and female athletes who appear to embody humility and modesty tend to receive more coverage. Indeed, as noted above, four of the five high profile Kiwi women at the Olympics have been recognised in national surveys as representing this characteristic ("Who do", 2007) and media coverage of Vili also appears to follow this trend.

In the next section, I focus on coverage of New Zealand's only 2004 female Olympic medallists, Sarah Ulmer and the Evers-Swindell twins, who embody characteristics that appear to lead to higher coverage: they are winners, they were identified before the major event as potential winners, they have achieved national glory in the past and they remain humble and modest. The survey of media coverage in major newspapers showed very little evidence of stereotypical or 'usual' coverage, and only rarely were these women described in ways that intersected with traditional femininity such as being described as bubbly, effervescent or blonde, or through a focus on appearance or family/relationships. Where this did occur, in the case of Ulmer's partner Brendan Cameron or Georgina Evers-Swindell's boyfriend Sam Earl, the men were discussed in relation to their sporting connection to the athletes; Cameron as Ulmer's coach and Earl as an injured rower working in a support capacity for the New Zealand rowing team. Instead, the focus was on the importance and value of their achievements for their country. Throughout the coverage, the women were represented as a credit to the nation and as reflecting important national character traits such as the ability to deal with pressure, physical and mental toughness, determination, humility and a down to earth nature. For example: "... the Evers-Swindell sisters and Ulmer, whose natural, down-to-earth manner cannot disguise their mental and physical toughness and grim determination not to finish second best".

In stark contrast to gender ideologies of female weakness, they were represented in ways that emphasised physical power, strength and domination. Ulmer's performances, in which she twice broke

her individual pursuit world record on the way to winning gold, were described in terms such as scorching, crushing, overpowering, blistering, sizzling and shattering. Her world record and win were represented as sensational, phenomenal, outstanding, shimmering, gobsmacking, brilliant, remarkable, exceptional and stunning. Ulmer herself was described as a perfectionist, world-class, cool and calculating, in absolute control, composed, relaxed and focused and at the top of her game. While the descriptors for the Evers-Swindells were not as diverse, perhaps because the final of the double sculls was much closer than anticipated despite the ‘twins’ not having been beaten at an international level for three years, they were described as confident, showing absolute commitment and beating off a determined challenge with their own sweat and determination. The images, headlines and captions that accompanied the stories focused on the athletes as winners: showing them with medals, smiling, on the podium or immediately after the race and highlighting terms like gold, glory, medals, winners and victory.

Thus, from this analysis of print media coverage, it became apparent that the concepts of gender marking, compulsory heterosexuality, appropriate femininity, infantilisation, downplaying sport and ambivalence, provided very little help in understanding the way that these female athletes were represented. In this case, nationalism almost completely overrode the usual ways that the sports media report on female athletes.

Case Study 2: Gendered Discourses in New Zealand Sports Comedy

In contrast to Case Study 1, the second case demonstrates the ways in which mediasport can support traditional beliefs about gender difference. It is based on an in-depth content and textual analysis of two episodes of the popular sports comedy show, *Sportscafe*, during its last season in 2005 (see Hurley, Dickie, Hardman, Lardelli & Bruce, 2006). The authors were all fans and regular viewers who took the position that fandom and critical analysis were not mutually exclusive. It is important to note that the analysis did not attribute intention to the show’s producers and hosts and, indeed, the show’s creator and executive producer Ric Salizzo openly rejected the findings, suggesting the *Sportscafe* hosts “didn’t take anything

seriously...Our show revolved around taking the piss. We did it constantly” (Collins, 2006, p. 9). However, regardless of the intentions of the producers, the findings suggest that the comedy in the show acted to marginalize women as well as men who did not fit within a limited and narrow definition of acceptable masculinity.

While there has been remarkably little attention paid to popular sports comedy or game shows – e.g., *Sportscafe*, *A Game of Two Halves*, *Sportzah*, *Pulp Sport* – they are now a regular part of New Zealand television programming. Australian research suggests that sports comedy may either challenge or support the widespread belief that sport is the domain of men (Burke, 2002; Cook & Jennings, 1995). For example, Burke (2002) argues in relation to *The Footy Show* that “a type of locker room humour pervades the show...using women and ‘unmasculine’ males as the major source of jokes” (p. 86). The humour used in *The Footy Show* can be linked to the emergence of a form of masculinity termed ‘new laddism’, which Garry Whannel (1999) describes as a response to successful feminist challenges to patriarchal power. He suggests that new laddism represents a form of dominant masculinity that does little to embrace gender equality. Although new laddism has been proposed as a form of post-feminist, self-confident, post-modern irony, Whannel argues that it actually represents a backward step for gender relations. Irony, thus, becomes “the cloak within which the cultural producers of new lad culture smuggle in sexism” (p. 257). He also suggests that “men behaving badly may be nothing new, but the resurgence of a celebratory and uncritical attitude towards such behaviour marks a shift in a more general trend of successes in battles against sexism” (1999, p. 257). One major concern is that while adults may be able to ‘read’ or interpret the show ironically, its messages are likely to be “especially attractive to young men and adolescent boys seeking concrete expressions of male identity” who may draw upon it as a resource for modelling appropriate male behaviour (J. Coakley, personal communication, November 11, 2006). Although the original study focused on representations of masculinity and femininity (see Hurley et al., 2006), this discussion is limited to how *Sportscafe* represented women in sport.

The first key theme was that *Sportscafe* reinforced the dominant ideology that real sport is men’s sport. Most obviously, the lack of female guests and images of skilled female athletes in the show’s

visual montages suggested that female sport was not interesting or serious enough to be featured. Further, the experience and skill required for elite success were not always acknowledged, as in one interview when host Marc Ellis suggested that all the national women's skeleton racing team needed in order to win was "an overweight bird, a really fat bird ... a fat chick". In addition, as in mediasport in general, men dominated *Sportscafe*. A content analysis of one show found that males were on screen 64 per cent of the time. When females did appear, they were often not talking. This was particularly true of female host Lana Coc-Kroft, who was positioned between two male hosts and predominantly appeared in camera shots with them rather than alone. The content analysis demonstrated that her main role appeared to be to keep the show on schedule for advertising breaks and that her comments were often drowned out by the male hosts speaking over her. Coc-Kroft was frequently denied the opportunity to act as an authoritative voice on sport – thus reinforcing the power the males have within the discourse of sport (see also Burke, 2002).

Coc-Kroft did, however, attempt to disrupt the overwhelmingly masculine ethos of the show. For example, she took Australian guest cyclist Katie Mactier seriously by listing all her sporting successes and asking relevant, sport-related questions. She also challenged the "fat bird" and "fat chick" comments, suggesting Ellis make other word choices such as "lady/female/person of the opposite sex" – although he dismissed her efforts with "does it really matter?" and later used the term "lady" with sarcastic overemphasis. However, despite Coc-Kroft's efforts, the overwhelming 'message' of the show was that real sport was men's sport and that females were unimportant as athletes but good to look at or to make jokes about.ⁱⁱ

The second major theme was the sexualisation of females. A key element of new laddism is its "reconstruction of a pre-feminist objectification of women" (Whannel, 1999, p. 257). Arguing from an American sporting context, Curry (1991) suggests that being a real man also means inhabiting a male-defined world in which, for much of the time, women are sexualized, marginalized or excluded and men learn that they should objectify and dominate females. In much of the sports media females are featured as sexy props or prizes for elite male athletes (Messner et al., 2000) and female

sexuality is discussed “in a titillating manner” (McGregor & Melville, 1995, p. 35).

Overall, sexualisation was a prevalent theme on *Sportscafe*, reinforced by regular sexual innuendo and sarcastic references to male heterosexual prowess (or lack thereof). This theme was most evident in the representation of the unnamed female dancers whose main role was to perform while the (usually male) guests walked onto the set. Throughout, the dancers remained voiceless and nameless while being the object of the gaze of the camera, studio audience and home viewers. Roving reporter and model, ‘Eva the Bulgarian’, was frequently sexualized via camera angles that highlighted her ‘feminine’ attributes such as breasts, lips and buttocks. In one show, her role as a sexy prize was particularly evident in Ric Salizzo’s comment about a male boxer that “we decided because he was so nice, we’d give him Eva”. On another show, an interview on a mini putt golf course ended with sexually provocative close-ups of Eva’s buttocks, accompanied by Graeme Hill’s comment, “the last shots were good.” While it was clear that the show’s ethos was to make fun of many aspects of sport and that Eva’s role involved undercutting the seriousness of most sports discourse by refusing to take it seriously (in similar fashion to the role played by Leigh Hart as That Guy) – this does not mean that her role did not also reinforce dominant ideologies of gender.

The framing of women as sex objects was also apparent in a segment in which All Black Dave Hewitt nominated successful businessmen Bill Gates and Richard Branson and actors Morgan Freeman and Catherine Zeta-Jones as his four preferred dinner guests. Ellis’ response – “you’d fancy yourself to score Catherine Zeta-Jones against the others” – pointed to an assumption that Zeta-Jones’ presence at the dinner would be purely as a sex object. The show also downplayed the seriousness of issues such as sexual harassment by making fun of the publicity around Australian cricketer Shane Warne sending unwelcome sexually explicit text messages to females.

Women were regularly presented or responded to as ‘eye candy’ for the male presenters and viewers. In just one example, the arrival of attractive blond cyclist Katie Mactier onto the stage was greeted with a huge “YEAH!” from Marc Ellis; a response that he did not

give for any of the male guests and was consistent with his reactions to attractive females who appeared on other shows.

Overall, through its representations of stereotypical masculinity and female subordination, the show appeared to celebrate “the new laddist reassertion of ‘traditional’ masculine values” (Whannel, 1999: 262) while masking its messages in boyish humour. It used humour in ways that appeared to take a post-modern ironic position – a bit of a laugh at men behaving badly. Thus, even with its focus on ‘taking the piss’, rather than challenging our taken-for-granted understandings of sport, *Sportscafe* ended up reinforcing the position that sport is a male domain in which women play only a marginal role.

Conclusions

The New Zealand mediasport landscape is diverse and the variety of media research discussed in this chapter points to an increasingly complex terrain across which images and representations of female athletes traverse. On one hand, the sports media fail to acknowledge much of the sporting success of female athletes. The continued absence of females in everyday media coverage, as well as the ways they are represented on shows like *Sportscafe*, does little to challenge cultural assumptions that sport is the natural domain of men.

On the other hand, New Zealand mediasport demonstrate the ability to celebrate and take women athletes seriously, most often in relation to international sporting competition and netball, the sport which has long been considered the “most suitable for women” (Nauright, 1999, p. 51). Women who receive this kind of visibility have become popular public figures, as the surveys of most trusted New Zealanders make clear. Further, they are represented as tough, focused, talented athletes who should be admired by all New Zealanders. As a result, this form of coverage does much to challenge historical beliefs about female weakness and unsuitability for sport.

Overall, however, the unfortunate outcome of New Zealand’s patterns of mediasport coverage is that Kiwi women are highlighted for about four weeks every four years – two weeks each for the

Commonwealth and Olympic Games – but remain almost invisible during the remaining 204 weeks of each four year cycle.

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Endnotes

ⁱ An earlier version of these ideas was presented at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport conference in November 2006 in Vancouver, Canada. In that paper, Susan Chapman analysed the quantitative data and Toni Bruce analysed the qualitative data (see also Bruce & Chapman, forthcoming; Bruce & Chapman, 2006).

ⁱⁱ This is not to say that certain men's sports were not also made fun of. However, as we suggest in the original paper, the show celebrates men's sports that reinforce dominant ideals of masculinity such as toughness, aggression and inflicting and receiving pain. The original paper is available on the sportsfreak.co.nz website [<http://www.sportsfreak.co.nz/show-column.asp?ID=230>] and had been viewed almost 5,000 times by February 2008.