

THE SEX APPEAL OF SPORTS

Objectifying sexy athletes is something we should be ashamed of

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EDS NOTE: The long, toned limbs. The broad, proud chests. The sun-bronzed, confident faces. When it comes to the elements of sex appeal, athletes' generally skimpy work clothes leave little to the imagination - and that's before athletes such as Olympic swimmer Amanda Beard use their looks and fame to pose out of uniform for certain magazines. From the unwitting Internet fame of a high school track-and-field star, to the endorsement opportunities of beauties like Maria Sharapova, to the exhibitionism of some like Beard, the seemingly growing connection between sports and sex raises a lot of issues. The best might be this: Should fans feel guilty if they view athletes a little bit as sex objects, admire their legs as much as their tactical smarts, ponder their measurements as much as their winning percentages? We put the question to two writers. Their answers might surprise you.

The cardboard box under the computer desk at home, one of those containers meant for document storage, overflowed with sports magazines, videotapes, DVDs and newspaper clippings to the point where it had to be either trashed or stashed elsewhere.

This box wasn't just filled with stuff. It was filled with Stuff.

And FHM, and Maxim, and a few copies of Playboy. Plus a Natalie Gulbis swimsuit calendar, an Anna Kournikova workout tape and probably a half-dozen Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues.

It was all work-related, things that had been researched and written about in one form or another. Yet I felt guilty for hanging onto those things for too long. I'd thought I'd feel even more guilty as I flipped through them one last time before discarding them lest they become a point of contention in another divorce-court proceeding.

Perspectives change over time. Closing in on 50years old, you'd like to think you're mature enough to stop processing life like a 25-year-old. Instead of watching ESPN early-morning workout shows for the eye-candy fix, you realize you should be viewing them as motivation to do an actual sit-up.

Grow up, you say to yourself.

As a parent, your job description includes setting an example. Discretion, responsibility, truth and trust mean something.

As a husband, you can't rationalize why your spouse shouldn't feel threatened - or just plain irked - by coming across a magazine folded open to a picture of a dolled-up Danica Patrick lying across the hood of a car.

As a journalist, trying to maintain ethical standards as you form opinions, you ask yourself why you'd trivialize athletes' achievements by judging how they look in - and out of - their swimsuits.

Yes, there comes a point where your conscience isn't something to be pushed aside. When you Google to ogle, you're minimalizing a person.

There's a fair list of sports figures, female and male, who've crossed over and really can't go back, and that's kind of a sad thing. In trying to be this "total package" that their agents keep pushing them to be - while earning nice percentages for the advice - athletes sell their souls to fill-in-the-advertiser, make a nice cash grab, and move along to the next paycheck.

And we help perpetuate it by buying the magazines, supporting the sponsors, getting sucked into the scam.

To get a better gauge on where my moral compass was pointed, I sought out some opinions from those I thought had it going on in the world of female athletics.

"I know plenty of young girls that will try to emulate everything I do, from the music I pick, to what I wear ... they want to copy everything because they see me as a role model, representing my country," said Angela Ruggiero, the three-time U.S. Olympic women's hockey player born in Panorama City, who is training to compete in the 2010 Vancouver Games while running her own summer camp.

"As a female athlete, it's a free country to make lots of money doing whatever you want to do. But if you recognize millions of girls watch you during the Olympics, or any high-visibility sport, then in my opinion it's not a very smart thing for a role model to do. It can be very detrimental.

"If all you want out of life is fame and money, maybe that's the right ticket, to pose for magazines. I represent certain ideals as an Olympic athlete. If I was asked, I'd turn it down."

Pat Summitt, the University of Tennessee's Hall of Fame women's basketball coach, was at the recent ESPY Awards in Hollywood, where plenty of female athletes were glammed up for the occasion, many having their pictures taken on the red carpet so the photos could be bought and sold elsewhere. I asked Summitt what she thought entices female athletes to pose for magazines with as little clothing as possible.

"Women should understand we have a great platform that brings about athletes as respected," Summitt said. "To me that speaks more volumes, and that's more appealing than posing in a magazine.

"If one of my players did that, I'd be disappointed. It's more of a personal decision, but not a very good one, in my opinion."

Pam Shriver was on the other side of the net at an infamous Wimbledon match in 1985, when opponent Anne White created a scene and wore a white Lycra unitard to the match. Shriver complained the outfit was distracting. When the match carried over to the next day, officials asked White not to wear it, and she complied.

"It's really up to the parents to teach their kids about the consequences for doing things and acting responsibly," said Shriver, an ESPN analyst on WTA events and the mother of three young children living in Brentwood. "People will look at you in a different light. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, it was never made to be an option for me."

On ESPN's "Around the Horn," Jackie MacMullan, the respected Boston Globe columnist and Sports Illustrated writer, was asked about Amanda Beard posing for Playboy.

"She's a grown adult, beautiful, it's her right to pose," MacMullan started. And then came the "but."

"It's tough enough for a woman to make inroads in sports and gain respect," MacMullan said. "Every time someone does something like this, it's a step back. You make her an object instead of an athlete. It's a personal choice, but it sets women's athletics back."

On the Internet, a search for reaction to Beard's photo display found the swimmer quoted saying that the only opinions that matter to her are those of her family and friends.

But back at the ESPY Awards, Beard was asked what Michael Phelps, the star U.S. male swimmer, thought of her Playboy appearance.

"I don't want to know," Beard said, seemingly flustered. "He's like my little brother."

Too late now.

By Beard's admission, whatever USA Swimming executive director Chuck Wielgus thinks about her posing isn't relevant. But in a Colorado Springs Gazette story headlined "Rogue or Vogue?" Wielgus said: "As a membership that caters primarily to children and teenagers, I don't feel that the appearance is an appropriate portrayal of our sport. ... We strive to promote the values of hard work, dedication and teamwork that swimming instills in its young athletes and families."

Courtney Thompson, a standout U.S. women's volleyball player, added in the story: "As an elite woman athlete, if you are in a spotlight you have to be aware of how you're affecting the younger generation. It surprises me someone with that much power and income would need to (pose). I wouldn't think all that extra money would be worth it to her."

In 2004, five years after the United States won the Women's World Cup, women's soccer was having a hard time establishing a pro league. Sepp Blatter, the president of FIFA, suggested that the women's game might be more popular if they wore tighter shorts. Julie Foudy, the president of the Women's Sports Council, responded: "We'll start wearing tighter shorts when he starts doing press conferences in his bathing suit."

See where that slippery slope goes?

We will note that Gulbis recently won her first LPGA event in France - after six years of trying. We've marked it down on our Gulbis calendar, just before we tossed it in the recyclebin.

The rest of that stuff in the box went in the same direction, hopefully turned into something more productive in its next lifecycle.

There's no more guilt by association here. Athletes-turned-models ask us to respect their decisions. Hopefully, they'll respect this decision as well.

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