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Sex sells? Not so fast

Women's sports need substance, not pretty pictures

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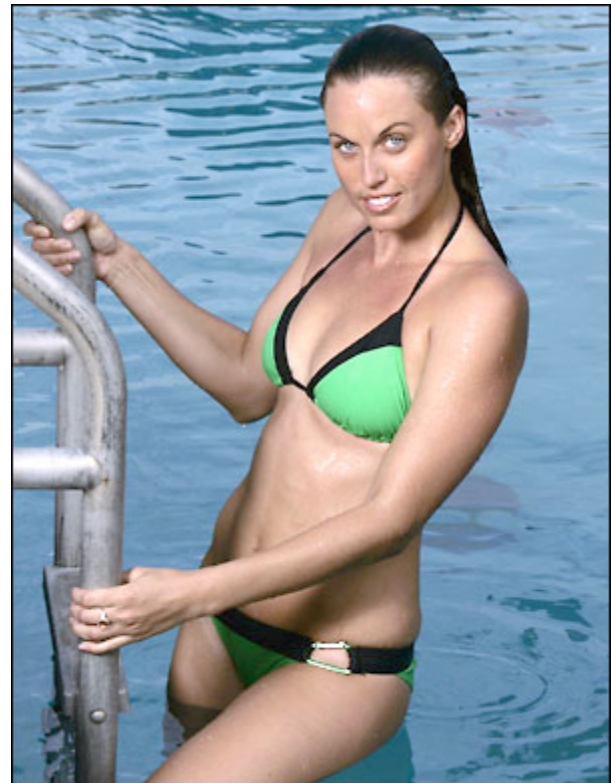
Sex doesn't sell.

Jan Stevenson got naked in a bathtub of golf balls back in the 1980s, **Brandi Chastain** took off her clothes for *Gear* magazine before the 1999 World Cup, and swimmer **Amanda Beard** is going to be in *Playboy* next month. But according to a ground-breaking pilot study, none of that did -- or will do -- a single thing for women's sports. Sexy pictures don't make people more likely to read about women's sports, they don't make anyone more likely to attend a women's sporting event, and they sure don't drive any season-ticket sales.

Seriously -- sex doesn't sell women's sports?

"Well, no one would ever argue with the notion that sex sells," said professor **Mary Jo Kane**, the director of the Tucker Center for Research of Girls and Women in Sport, at the University of Minnesota, and the brain behind this stereotype-shaking study. "The question is -- what does it sell? It may in fact be that males will pick up *Playboy* when there's a picture of a naked female athlete, but is what they are consuming a woman athlete or some woman's body as an object of sexual desire?"

So far, the answer has been the latter. Yes, conventional wisdom has always said sex appeal -- in all parts of our culture -- is the greatest lure. The way to get a man to look at a female is if she's hot. You'll know Beard is an Olympian because she's in *Playboy*. Some attention is better than no attention, especially for a gender that gets between 6 and 8 percent of space in sports sections.



Seven-time Olympic medalist Amanda Beard has appeared in FHM, Maxim and SI, but has any of that really helped the profile of her sport?

Heinz Klutmeier/SI

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Since the dawn of newsprint, women athletes have been portrayed in ways that emphasize "femininity and sexualization over athletic competence," Kane said. During the 2000 Olympics, **Marion Jones** won five medals; **Amy Acuff** won none, yet she was photographed by American papers about 20 times more than Jones and Acuff graced the *Playboy* cover in Sept. 2004.

Everyone knows that the main disseminators of sports news are men. At Penn State's Center for Sports Journalism, **Marie Hardin** surveyed 200 sports departments and found that, on average, their breakdown was 89 percent male, 11 percent female. That includes clerks and administrative assistants. Maybe male editors prefer the ideological representations of women because it doesn't threaten their masculinity. Maybe they prefer pretty pictures.

Still, research says that sort of coverage trivializes women and their sports. Now, Kane's research says playing into those portrayals is actually undermining women's sports. They're hurting because their core fan base is not into a bikini-clad **Natalie Gulbis**.

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