Like Beauty, Exploitation is in the Eye of the Beholder:

An Examination of Women Olympic Athletes Posing Nude

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There is a boldness when you declare your purpose with your anatomy. When each muscle announces your intent. When your size is your design, your weapon, and you carry your body without shame.¹

An increasing number of Olympic women athletes have been shedding their clothing in the name of fundraising and attracting more popularity to their sports. One must wonder at what price does this new found fame occur? Numerous ethical issues arise when women athletes pose nude; I will attempt to examine the ethical issues surrounding athletes posing nude and use examples to illustrate and support the arguments. The aim of this paper is to discuss the central concepts and potential moral issues surrounding Olympic athletes who pose nude to increase awareness of and funding for, their sports. The paper is presented in the following sections: I) Pornography and sport; II) Sexualization of the female body; III) Examination of nude photographs, and IV) Conclusion and Reflections.

Pornography and Sport

In order to examine the photos of women athletes posing nude, the concept of pornography needs to be addressed. Prior to arguing whether or not the nude photos possess elements of pornography, pornography itself needs to be defined. The debate of what actually constitutes pornography has been going on in philosophy; the most agreeable explanation is one first stated by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart: “But I know it [hard-core pornography] when I see it...”² The current legal definition of pornography is expressed as: “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women whether in pictures or words.”³

Some feminist philosophers such as Leslie Green and Catherine MacKinnon have written extensively against pornography and the harm it inherently poses for women, whereas philosophers like Wendy McElroy, on the other hand, have developed arguments that are supportive of pornography. Their arguments are illustrated below.

Leslie Green, author of “Pornographies,” argues that pornography encourages women to believe many men’s views of women as sexual objects and in turn accept abuse situations.⁴ Green discusses how the issue of pornography traditionally raises the moral concern of men attempting to possess women. By most evaluations, pornography is considered to be harmful to women; these evaluations claim that it desensitizes men and drives them to rape, abuse, and to discriminate against women.⁵ Further, it is claimed that pornography is the subordination and silencing of women, where subordination consists of denying women of their dignity and personal identity.⁶

One of the most well-noted, anti-pornography, radical feminist philosophers is Catherine MacKinnon. In her piece “Only Words,” MacKinnon examines the critical issues surrounding pornography. Many individuals believe that women who aren’t actually posing in the pornographic pictures should not feel exploited; women should not associate themselves with images of “those women.”

Even if something wrong is done to you, how metaphysically obtuse can you be? The pictures themselves do nothing. They are an expression of ideas, a discussion, a debate, and a discourse. How repressed and repressive can you be? They are constitutionally protected speech.⁷

Many critics of anti-pornography movements argue that pornography does not actually harm women with its images and dirty

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jokes describing women's bodies; however MacKinnon disagrees somewhat, and claims that the consumer eventually desires to live out the pornography in further dimensions. She believes that pornography does not simply express and interpret experience but rather substitutes for it:

Similar, on the consumption end, it is not the ideas in pornography that assault women: Men do, men who are made, changed, and impelled by it. Pornography does not leap off the shelf and assault women. Women could, in theory, walk safely past whole warehouses full of it, quietly resting in its jackets. It is what it takes to make it and what happens through its use that are the problem...

In other words, MacKinnon is arguing that pornographic magazines themselves do not actually harm women. The harm occurs in the way the porn industry functions. The consumer soon becomes part of the sexual dominance over women and women's bodies.

Wendy McElroy author of "A Woman's Right to Pornography" argues that MacKinnon accepts the idea that pornography degrades women and considers it in itself to be an act of sexual violence. McElroy finds MacKinnon's arguments to be compelling yet problematic. According to McElroy, anti-porn feminists such as MacKinnon have taken away women's rights to pursue their own sexuality without shame, apology, guilt, and or censure. The crux of McElroy's arguments is that there is nothing to fear regarding pornography and that it should be considered as part of the healthy free flow of information regarding sex. Most of the research conducted by McElroy was the result of her observing the pornography industry and establishing close contacts within.

McElroy is rather critical of McKinnon's "Only Words" piece and maintains her position that pornography represents sexual freedom, sexual free speech, as an integral piece of the battle for women's freedom. Furthermore, McElroy argues that the censoring of sexual words and images does not only lead to the suppression of women's sexual rights but also attempts to control women themselves. Traditionally, women's rights have been defined in terms of their sexuality: marriage, abortion, and birth control, and furthermore to surrender control over female individual sexual expression is in turn denying women's sexuality in the first place.

The purpose of observing two different standpoints regarding pornography is to reinforce that many individuals interpret and judge pornography in various fashions. The focus is not to argue which of these two claims is more plausible but rather to illustrate the confusion and issues arising when discussing the naked female body.

Sexualization of the Female Body

It is difficult to examine nude photographs of women athletes without addressing sexualization and its role within women's sports. Paul Davis in "Sexualization and Sexuality in Sport" argues that the sexualized image of female athletes is commonly found in newspapers and television coverage of sport. In order for an image to involve sexualization, Davis claims that three specific forms must be present. The first involves a deliberate sexual focus on significant body parts for the purpose of increasing sexual arousal. The second characteristic displays freezing, a type of emphasis that involves an erotic seduction. The third and final case is of the "sexy" photo that has a comic relief caption trivializing the athletic competition and even the athlete herself.

Davis's analysis proposes that the human response of sexual desire encompasses a metaphysical aspect where we view ourselves as pure, united individuals filled with endless possibility, located outside the limits of the body. We are responsible for our present action at every future time and this correlates to being a person.

A critical question that Davis poses is that if we cannot implement free will through our bodies, is it possible for it to be implemented at all? In sexual desire we do not actually desire the body, but rather, what is desired is a free willing, perspectival and responsible being. The true aim of desire is the embodiment of both body and soul; in sexual desire the embodiment of person as body-subject is stimulation. When photos of women athletes emphasize a sexual part of the body then it could be argued that a detachment occurs with the body from the athletic bodily agency that is participating in sport. In other words, by simply focusing on a sexual part of the woman, the viewer sees the woman primarily as a sexual object rather than identifying her as woman athlete. A transition occurs from subject to object.

Examination of Nude Photos

It appears that at the turn of the new century, the newest phase or craze is posing nude. It is not simply an example of athletes either: a group of 35 year-old women posed naked for a calendar to raise money in order to save the Saltspring Island from logging in Vancouver. Also, in Montreal, an art exhibit took place where nine Quebec athletes posed nude for a photo shoot. The pictures were then part of a special edition of Geo Plein Air Magazine.

The first sample of photographs that will be examined involve the Canadian Women's Nordic Ski team. Five women from the team launched a 2001 calendar appropriately titled: "The Nordic Nudes." The producers of the calendar claim that it has more of
an athletic look rather than a "sexy look": "They're very tasteful photos. You won't see anything too revealing. You can see the girls' muscles."²⁰

The skiers received 30% of the profits from the 30$ calendars. These were much-needed funds as the Nordic Ski team’s annual budget was slashed from one million dollars to three hundred thousand dollars.²¹ One could suggest that in order to compensate for their very drastic loss of funds, the members of the ski team, applied the present day motto ‘sex sells’ in order to produce this calendar. One of the members of the team expressed her opinion about being photographed: "Some people say it is sad that the sport had to come to this. But it's a better image to have athletic girls who are nude than girls who are skinny because they smoke and eat rice crackers."²²

The above comment alludes to the argument that because these athletes represent healthier non-waif super model bodies, the female athletic body reproduces a better body image. The athletic body is considered as being more socially acceptable because it is a symbol of empowerment escaping traditional images of femininity and domesticity; however, at the same time, it is socially acceptable only to a certain degree. This argument will appear later on in the paper.

Appendix A and B, represent two examples from the cross-country team calendar. By examining the photos one can conclude that the athletes are not representing an erotic image in the pornographic sense. Their lips are not parted, and body positions are not connoting the positioning of women who are typically found in pornography. They are not lying down in submissive poses nor do they portray the "sex kitten" pose of erotic body positions and gestures. They seem more "lively" than anything and do not reinforce passiveness.

Feminist author Helen Lenskyj observes how a sad state of affairs has occurred because of selling the sex appeal of sport. Women athletes who are in great need for funding from the government and sponsors now feel that they must resort to selling their bodies for the good for their sport.²³ Numerous athletes have voiced their opinions regarding Olympic athletes selling themselves for the good of the game. The following is a comment made by Canadian synchronized swimmer Claire Carver Dios:

I think for women in sport, it’s been a battle to gain credibility, respect, and integrity from the sports world. This just may be taking away from that and putting the focus back on women’s bodies and the sexual side of things instead of focusing on the athletic side.²⁴

The second sample, Appendix C, contains four of the United States of America Olympic team swimmers. The photo was part of the Women’s Sport and Fitness Magazine: “Road to Sydney Games” Special Edition. The image displays finely tuned muscular arms and legs rather than focusing on the male gaze (breasts and buttocks region). It is neither provocative nor erotic but rather is a celebration of the human body. This photograph does not represent pornography, as these women were captured as strong and powerful, not sexual and seductive. What is interesting about this photograph is that it is the most “muscular” of all the samples, yet upon displaying to others, many of the comments emphasize just how muscular the women are and claim that they are not as attractive as the other female examples. Those comments can suggest that it is acceptable for women to possess a certain degree of muscularity but there is a limit as to what is still considered to be attractive, feminine, and heterosexually appealing.

In the land down under, the Australian National Soccer team launched a calendar to raise money and their profile for the Sydney 2000 games. This calendar sold some 35,500 copies via the World Wide Web.²⁵ The soccer players claimed that they posed nude because the naked human form was considered art thousands of years ago and they wanted to do something that would attract maximum attention to their sport. They expose every inch of their bodies; refer to Appendix D, sans props that could have hidden breasts and the pubic hair regions.²⁶

One player, only eighteen years old, posed completely nude to prove that female soccer players are not all “butchy” masculine-looking individuals.²⁷ She figured that the media attention would be positive because they were proving to the fans they could be feminine and look attractive as athletes as well; yet, most importantly they reinforced a heterosexual image. The eighteen-year-old player poses some concern because she is rather young and has just reached the legal age of consent [in Canada]. But what would happen if younger athletes wanted to be part of the team and posed nude? Could this be considered “kiddie porn?” Would a legal age limit need to become established?

Of all the photographs examined, the Matilda Calendar is considered to be the sample that displays the most comparable characteristics to pornography. One can see that the pose is submissive in nature and captured in an erotic sense. The full view of the athlete’s nipples as she crawls along the beach is rather similar to pictures that one would find in Playboy.

The Matildas argue that if a young sportswoman cannot find glory in her body, then who can? The soccer players are not ashamed of the calendar; they are quite pleased with the way they photographed and are proud of what they have achieved through their bodies.

The 5th photo, Appendix E, is Brandi Chastain the famous American soccer player. The photo appeared on the cover of Gear Magazine, and should not be considered as pornographic in nature. She is flexing, displaying an incredibly toned body, and not attempting to look erotic. The contours of her muscles represent years and years of training and hard work. Heather Kaulback, the
2000 Operations Director for the Canadian Olympic Team, is a supporter of women athletes posing nude and argues:

> When we start exposing more elite Olympic athletes to the general public, I think we get a little more used to the idea that it's ok to play tough and physical sports. I think we're educating the general public that it's ok to be female and a good athlete.\(^{28}\)

The above statement unfortunately emphasizes that in order to justify women playing tough physical sports, femininity needs to be highlighted and this is best achieved through viewing the body nude.

The magazine *Playboy* featured Olympic beach volleyball player Gabrielle Reece as its cover girl for January 2001. The “article” in *Playboy* described Gabrielle's presence in the following manner: “her physical presence- 6’3” and 160 pounds of curvy, gym-sculpted, cinnamon-hued muscle- inspires awe, respect and maybe a little fear.”\(^{29}\) Reece, refer to Appendix F, discusses how the photographer who captured her photos for the magazine celebrates her size and power:

> I don’t think of the images as sexual. Our goal was to shoot the body as a form. They’re more of a statement that a woman can be really powerful, really feminine, really natural and really confident and just put it out there...I wasn’t trying to create layers between myself and the pictures. The only things I hand on were mascara and sun-block. In a sense, they’re more me than any pictures I’ve ever had taken.\(^{30}\)

Reece’s photo differs from the previous samples examined, in that she is completely exposed and the male gaze is definitely present in all shots. Her lips are parted, the “come on” expression is present and body position implies a type of availability, although her photos definitely do not match the rest of the magazine’s raunchiness. They are not completely erotic or attempting to create as much sexual arousal like other *Playboy* photos. Tasteful is a term that could be applied. Reece, according to *Playboy*, discussed how some men would call her freak and stay away from her. It was also mentioned that through these photos Reece felt the most sexy she has ever felt and so comfortable with her body. What is disturbing about that claim is that it required posing nude for *Playboy* for her to come to that realization. Does *Playboy* really signify society’s ideals of what is sexy?

**Conclusions and Reflections**

An individual can easily observe that the issues surrounding Olympic athletes posing nude is not one of a black and white nature, but in fact, it is rather complex and many factors play a part. One must keep in mind that exploitation, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, hence why different individuals will have varying opinions regarding the sample of photos that were analyzed.

Critics of women’s sports could comment that posing nude is the only way women athletes will ever be able to generate funding and support comparable to men’s sport. If this is true then the outlook for women sports is not a positive one. We have to ensure that when we are selling sex via nude photographs of women, that we aren’t selling out women’s sport at the same time.

I see no major problems with the sample of photos provided; however, in the context of women’s sport, they indicate a larger problem. It appears that the only way that women can be taken seriously as Olympic athletes is to insure that, at the same time, they are still accessible as sexual objects.

In concluding, I believe Socrates captured it best: "[I have spent] all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions but for the highest welfare for your souls." \(^{31}\)

**Endnotes**

1. See article by Allison Glock in *Women's Sport and Fitness* (September 2000), 83.
2. see M.G.Lord, in *Lingua Franca*, OnLine Source. (April/May 1997). M.G. Lord observed feminists who studied, taught, and defended pornography.
5. Ibid., 27.
6. Ibid., 28.
Like Beauty, Exploitation is in the Eye of the Beholder

8 Ibid., 439.

9 Ibid., 440.


11 Ibid., 78.

12 Ibid., 78.


14 Ibid., 286.

15 Ibid., 286.

16 Ibid., 288.

17 Ibid., 290.


19 Jason Van Rassel. “Naked ambition: sport figures strip down to raise awareness and much needed funds” The Sunday Sun (September 17, 2000) 42.


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., see Helen Lenskyj for comments.

24 Randy Starkman “Top female athletes take clothes off to get more exposure for their sport.” The Toronto Sun. (December 28, 1999).

25 Jason Van Rassel. “Naked ambition: sport figures strip down to raise awareness and much needed funds” The Sunday Sun (September 17, 2000), 42.

26 John Bryant “Stripping Matildas revive sports ancient traditions.” IOC Press Release. (December 2, 1999). The notion of the naked body as art versus pornography is an interesting area to research; unfortunately, for this project, it was too extensive to be incorporated.

27 Van Rassel, 42.

28 Tom Malhoney “A New Image Exposed” www.caaws.ca (September, 2000)

29 “She’s got game—but no clothes: Gabby serves up an ace for Playboy” Playboy. (January 2001 48(1)), 92.

30 Ibid., 92.

Appendix E

Appendix F