
EDITORIAL



Three Strikes and You're Out?

Toby Miller

Brendan Lemon, editor of the queer monthly magazine *Out*, devoted his editorial for the April 2001 issue to outing a major league U.S. baseballer as his boyfriend. Or rather, he almost did. No names, no positions, but some hints—plays for a fabled Eastern franchise and is “a recognizable media figure,” in Lemon’s words. Press reaction has been significant—newspaper column rants, talk-radio populist guesses, Matt Drudge internet dredges, and ESPN polls. These developments encourage us to ponder changes in professional sports with the pull and push of money and the media. What used to be thought of exclusively as jockish, male-spectator sports now include gay men and straight women as desirable targets for marketers. What used to be a subcurrent—sex appeal—is now visible and common in the marketing of sports.

The present moment is one of immense change in the public sexual culture of media and sports. Gay magazines circulate information to businesses about the spending power of their putatively childless, middle-class readership—with slogans like “Gay Money Big Market Gay Market Big Money.” The 1990s brought TV commercials showing Toyota’s male car-buying couple and two men furnishing their apartment together at Ikea, while Hyundai began appointing gay-friendly staff to dealerships, IBM targeted gay-run small businesses, Subaru placed advertisements on buses and billboards that had cars with gay-advocacy bumper stickers and registration plates coded to appeal to queers, and Volkswagen commercials featured two men driving around in search of home furnishings. (These campaigns are known as “encrypted ads” or “gay vague.” They are designed to make queers feel special for being “in the know” while not offending straights who are unable to read the codes.) Polygram’s classical-music division has a special gay promotional budget; Miller beer supported Gay Games ’94; Bud Light sponsored the 1999 San Francisco Folsom Street Fair,

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"the world's largest leather event"; and Coors introduced domestic-partner employee benefits to counteract its antigay image of the past (and was echoed by the major auto manufacturers in 2000). The spring 1997 network TV season saw twenty-two queer characters across the prime-time schedule, and three years later, there were thirty—clear signs of niche targeting—while gay and lesbian web sites were drawing significant private investment. Bruce Hayes, an out gay man who won a swimming relay gold for the United States at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, was a key figure in Levi Strauss's 1998-1999 Dockers campaign. The next year, Procter & Gamble, the nation's second largest advertiser, dropped plans to sponsor a projected talk TV show by antiqueer advice giver Laura Schlessinger following lobbying efforts.

Clearly, sports are undergoing immense change, with sex at its center. Sports' gender politics at the elite level today are far from total domination by straight, orthodox masculinity because of the niche targets that athletes are marketed to (such as straight women and gay men). Of course, evaluations of women's bodies have long been pivotal to selling goods, with the implied spectator a straight male. The beneficial aspect to marketing sports is its challenges to these gender conventions—the shoe is being sold on the other foot, as it were.

There is, of course, a regressive side to sports as business, such as displacing public attention from structural social inequalities. Our conjuncture continues to be one where, for example, invisible and unpaid women's work, such as ferrying players, mending uniforms, and so on, is the *sine qua non* of most sports, while men's power over women continues. But a decade ago, this invisibility extended to fandom: women spectators were excluded from the discourse of football in their voyeurism as well as their emotional and physical labor. Since then, changes have come. The American Dialect Society decreed *soccer mom* its 1996 "Word of the Year," as politicians vied for electoral support from middle-class women who drove children and men across country. In 1999, David Letterman troped the term when he coined the expression "soccer mamas" for the Women's World Cup of Soccer winners—both sexy and maternal now. In the mid-1990s, National Football League (NFL) administrators discerned a threat to the game's man appeal from other media forms and faced mothers who objected to their sons playing so mindlessly violent a sport. The league responded by hiring Sara Levinson to run marketing—the first woman employed in its central-office executive group other than as a secretary. She was selected because her previous job had been as copresident of MTV. The NFL wanted her to push merchandising spin-offs and attract female audiences. This became known as the Women's Initiative, named because "our research indicates that women like the tight pants on the players." Meanwhile, male players were complaining about the ritual objectification of

standing near naked as hundreds of administrators, owners, coaches, medics, scouts, and other men calibrated their bodies at meat-market conventions.

Today, retired track star Carl Lewis appears in fuck-me pumps for Pirelli tires, a company traditionally associated with calendars of conventionally attractive women; New York Knicks forward Larry Johnson sells Converse products dressed up as his grandmother; Ottawa Senators rookie Alexander Daigle poses as a female nurse for trading cards; world-champion boxer Chris Eubank models a Vivienne Westwood frock on Milanese catwalks; and lapsed power forward Dennis Rodman wears a white wedding gown to his book signing. Of course, there are misogynistic aspects to drag of this kind, but it is a new and burgeoning practice that suggests other transformations as well. For example, Baltimore Orioles outfielder Brady Anderson's web site features a poster shot emphasizing his crotch and chest and has gained many gay hits—about which he registers a “no comment.” This is a moment when, thanks to commodification of the male subject, he is brought out into the bright light of narcissism and purchase. The overcoding of male desire for women in the popular is being matched by a reversal of the previous undercoding of desire for men among straight women and gay men. Watch this space.