

A Descriptive Analysis of Race/Ethnicity and Sex of Individuals Appearing on the Covers of *Sports Illustrated* in the 1990s

Angela Lumpkin

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether the number of individuals pictured on the covers of Sports Illustrated during the 1990s was reflective of their levels of participation by sport, race/ethnicity, and sex. These descriptors of the individuals pictured on each cover between 1990 and 1999 were identified and analyzed. African Americans were pictured on more covers and more often in the sports of basketball, boxing, and track and field than were European Americans. The highest number of females on the covers in any year was five, with females in tennis pictured the most overall. That the percentage of covers of African Americans and females was less than their participation numbers in sports reaffirmed that European American males continued to be preferentially treated by being pictured on the covers of Sports Illustrated at a higher level than their participation numbers warranted.

Introduction

European American males have long dominated the highest levels of competitive sports in the United States. In addition to being the athletes, they also were the coaches, administrators, and owners as well as the newspaper reporters and other media personnel. European American males' exclusivity in most professional and intercollegiate sports for decades was perpetuated through economic control, political clout, and racial or sexual biases. African Americans often were not allowed to play with European Americans and thus relegated to separate, yet unequal, competitions. Females, who were perceived to be physiologically incapable

and unable to cope emotionally with competitive pressures, had few opportunities in sports. As societal attitudes changed and legal requirements were enacted in the second half of the twentieth century, prejudicial treatment against African Americans and females gradually lessened. As a result, the media increasingly reported on the achievements of African Americans and females in sports. Yet, even though more and more African Americans and females were competing and achieving in sports at the highest levels by the end of the century, it appeared that the media continued to favor European American males.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine whether the number of individuals pictured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* during the last decade of the century was reflective of their levels of participation by sport, race/ethnicity, and sex. Interpretations about the empirical data collected were made in an effort to determine whether African Americans and females were being treated equitably in this one measure of their status in sports.

Theoretical Construct

Legal mandates, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, provided opportunities for African Americans and females to demonstrate their abilities in sports at the highest levels. If past discriminatory practices were eliminated, then all races/ethnicities and both sexes could enjoy the benefits commensurate with their achievements in sports. However, since

the top competitive levels in sports have been and continue to be controlled by European American males, change or acceptance of African Americans and females as equals in sports occurred slowly.

It could be presumed that by the end of the twentieth century, decades after African Americans and females legally achieved equity and as both groups benefited from more enlightened societal attitudes, the media's coverage of individuals in sports would be color-blind and gender neutral. Yet, data in the *Racial and Gender Report Card* (Lapchick, 2005), national longitudinal studies of women in intercollegiate sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006), and the *Gender-Equity Report* (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2004) failed to support equity for African Americans in leadership roles in sports and competitive equity for females. The print and electronic media reflected, and maybe helped perpetuate, the continuation of the dominant position of European American males in sports.

Review of Literature

According to Lapchick (2005), by the end of the decade of the 1990s, African Americans were the majority of the athletes in professional basketball and football and men's intercollegiate basketball, yet European Americans held most of the top management positions in professional baseball, basketball, and football and intercollegiate athletics. The ideological hegemony of European Americans, according to D'Souza (1995) and West (2001), was illustrated through the power of European Americans over African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, the decision makers in the sport, like the media that reported on sports, looked different from the athletes on the field or court.

Levy and Bryant (1993) and Rainville and McCormick (1997) reported that the print and electronic media were more likely to feature or praise European Americans in sports than they were to positively highlight the accomplishments of ethnic minorities. Another indication of the

inferior treatment of African Americans was how their achievements in sports were described. Rather than crediting hard work, the media often attributed their successes to their natural abilities (Davis, 1990; Johnson, Hallinan, & Westerfield, 1999; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Sabo & Jensen, 1994).

African Americans in sports throughout the 1990s, despite their increased participation numbers, were not as favorably treated by the media as might have been expected. Sabo and Jensen (1994) and Levy and Bryant (1993) suggested that they were victims of covert and systemic racial stereotyping. Kinkema and Harris (1998) concluded that the print and electronic media used racist ideologies in describing African Americans.

The dominant position of males in sports as reported in the pages of *Sports Illustrated* has been reaffirmed by Davis (1993), Kane (1988), Lumpkin and Williams (1991), and Reid and Soley (1979). When females have been featured by the media, they often have been depicted negatively or marginalized through an emphasis on their physical attractiveness rather than on their athletic achievements (Daddario, 1994; Duncan, 1986, 1990, 1993; Duncan & Messner, 1998; Hall, 1993; Kinkema & Harris, 1998).

The print and electronic media have continued to emphasize the femininity of females in sports in how they were pictured, such as through posed rather than active shots. Fink and Kensicki (2002) in an examination of *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* reported that females were mostly portrayed in sports traditionally characterized as feminine, such as figure skating and gymnastics, possibly because of their revealing costumes. Alexander (1994) suggested that television reported more on females in individual rather than team sports.

This brief examination of the literature reaffirmed that throughout the 1990s, African Americans and females were not treated equitably. Even though legally they were equals and discrimination was not socially acceptable, in

reality, sports remained controlled by European American males, including more extensive, positive coverage accorded them by the media.

Method

Each cover ($n=520$) of *Sports Illustrated* from January 1990 through December 1999 was reviewed by the author with individual descriptors including sport, race/ethnicity, and sex recorded. While sex and sport were easily and accurately obtained, identifying race/ethnicity was more difficult since visual appearance was insufficient for identification. Feature articles and reports of sporting events in *Sports Illustrated*, which often, but not always, were associated with the individual on the cover, were most often used to categorize race/ethnicity. Whenever the information was insufficient, other sources were used to ensure accuracy in the identification of race/ethnicity. In addition to a single race/ethnicity, one category was "mixed race," which was operationally defined as an individual whose parents were of different races or ethnicities. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were compiled for the three evaluative criteria—sport, race/ethnicity, and sex—within each year of the decade and then analyzed relative to participation numbers.

Findings

The appearances on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* of African Americans (43.1%) exceeded the number for European Americans (37.1%) during the decade of the 1990s. Another 6.2% of the covers pictured multiple individuals of more than one race (see Table 1). Males were most frequently (87.9%) pictured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, with 6.0% of the covers (including 10 swimsuit models) picturing females. Individuals associated with football (29.6%), basketball (24.6%), and baseball (21.0%) were pictured most on this magazine's covers. Individuals in boxing, tennis, golf, and track and

field were the next most likely to be pictured on the covers.

More African Americans associated with basketball (18.8%) were pictured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*; more European Americans in football (14.8%) and baseball (9.8%) appeared on the covers during the 1990s (see Table 2). While there were 22 African Americans in boxing and 7 in track and field on the covers, European Americans in these sports appeared only once (a female in boxing) or not at all (track and field). European Americans in golf and tennis and internationals in ice hockey were more likely to be pictured on the covers than those of any other race/ethnicity in these sports.

Males were pictured on covers more frequently in almost every sport (see Table 3). In number of appearances, there were more females than males in figure skating and speed skating. Female tennis players were more likely to be pictured on the covers than were females in any other sport.

In 6 out of the 10 years examined, African Americans of both sexes were pictured more frequently on the covers than were European Americans of both sexes, with 1997 having the largest difference favoring African Americans (see Table 4). The highest number of females on the covers in any year was five in 1992, with one these picturing a model in a swimsuit. The number of covers picturing individuals in football exceeded those in other sports five of the years examined, while basketball and football tied with the most in two other years.

Discussion

Those pictured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* were most frequently athletes who had reached the pinnacle of their respective sports. Being outstanding in one's sport also could lead to selection by *Sports Illustrated* as the Sportsman and/or Sportswoman of the Year. As shown in Table 5, European American males received this recognition more frequently than did individuals of other races/ethnicities or sex.

Table 1
Race/Ethnicity of the Person on the Covers

Race/Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
European American	193	37.1%
African American	224	43.1%
Hispanic American	7	1.3%
Mixed races	9	1.7%
International	24	4.6%
Multiple individuals of more than one race	32	6.2%
Unknown or not listed	19	3.7%
Object, not a person	12	.23%
Total	520	100%

Table 2
Sport and Race/Ethnicity of the Person on the Covers

Sport	European American		African American		International	
	Frequency	Percent of total	Frequency	Percent of total	Frequency	Percent of total
Baseball	51	9.8%	30	5.8%	6	1.2%
Basketball	18	3.5%	98	18.8%	2	0.4%
Boxing	1	0.2%	22	4.2%	0	0.0%
Football	77	14.8%	56	10.8%	1	0.2%
Golf	9	1.7%	0	0.0%	3	0.6%
Ice hockey	3	0.6%	0	0.0%	6	1.2%
Skiing	2	0.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Soccer	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Tennis	9	1.7%	6	1.2%	5	1.0%
Track and field	0	0.0%	7	1.3%	0	0.0%

Table 3
Sport and Sex of the Person on the Cover

Males	Frequency	Percent of total	Females	Frequency	Percent of total
Baseball	102	19.6%	Baseball	2	0.4%
Basketball	119	22.9%	Basketball	2	0.4%
Boxing	23	4.4%	Boxing	1	0.2%
Figure skating	0	0.0%	Figure skating	3	0.6%
Football	146	28.1%	Football	0	0.0%
Golf	18	3.5%	Golf	0	0.0%
Ice hockey	8	1.5%	Ice hockey	0	0.0%
Speed skating	0	0.0%	Speed skating	1	0.2%
Soccer	2	0.2%	Soccer	2	0.4%
Swimming	2	0.4%	Swimming	0	0.0%
Tennis	13	2.5%	Tennis	8	1.5%
Track and field	6	1.2%	Track and field	2	0.4%

Table 4
 Analysis by Year for Race/Ethnicity and Sex on the Covers

Year	European American	African American	Hispanic American	Mixed races	International	Females
1990	24	19	1	0	1	3
1991	18	26	0	0	4	2
1992	18	25	0	0	3	5
1993	24	19	0	1	5	4
1994	14	22	1	0	2	2
1995	25	22	0	0	3	2
1996	17	23	3	3	2	4
1997	14	26	1	2	0	2
1998	25	16	1	1	3	3
1999	14	26	0	2	1	4
Total	193	224	7	9	24	31*

*This number includes 10 females appearing in each of the annual swimsuit issues.

Table 5
Sportsman/Sportswoman of the Year

Year	Individual(s)	Sport	Race/Ethnicity	Sex
1990	Joe Montana	Football	European American	Male
1991	Michael Jordan	Basketball	African American	Male
1992	Arthur Ashe	Tennis	African American	Male
1993	Don Shula	Football coach	European American	Male
1994	Bonnie Blair and Johann Olav Koss	Speed skating	European American and International	Female and male
1995	Cal Ripken, Jr.	Baseball	European American	Male
1996	Tiger Woods	Golf	mixed race	Male
1997	Dean Smith	Basketball coach	European American	Male
1998	Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa	Baseball	European American and International	Male
1999	World Cup championship team	Soccer	Mostly European Americans	Females

European Americans during the 1990s continued to dominate sports other than basketball, boxing, track and field, and football (African Americans) and ice hockey (internationals). The dearth of individuals from other ethnicities pictured on the covers confirmed their overall lower participation levels and achievements in most other sports.

While African Americans were pictured on the covers more often than were European Americans, these numbers were less than their participation levels at the professional and collegiate levels in the most popular sports of football, basketball, and baseball. In 1999, for example, Major League Baseball included 13% African Americans and 26% Latinos; African Americans (78%) dominated in the National Basketball Association; and 67% of the National Football League players were African Americans. National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I male student-athletes in 1999-2000 included 55%, 39.5%, and 6.6% African Americans on basketball, football, and baseball teams respectively (Lapchick, 2005). Despite their appearing on the covers more often than did any other race/ethnicity, *Sports Illustrated* failed to picture African Americans equitably. That is, with these three sports accounting for 75% of the total covers and these participation numbers, African Americans should have appeared more frequently than on only 43.1% of the covers.

The findings of this study added to the understanding of how this popular magazine persisted in favoring European Americans despite their lower number of participants in the most popular team sports in the 1990s. While progress has been made in the media's coverage of African Americans and other ethnic minorities, there remained at the end of the 1990s an editorial bias toward picturing more European Americans on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*.

The picturing on the covers of female tennis players more than those in any other sport reinforced that athletes in sports perceived to be more feminine (and where they dressed in

sexually appealing ways) were more likely to be pictured by this magazine. Given the dramatic increase in the number of females competing in sports and their achievements at the international, professional, and collegiate levels, the small number of females pictured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* substantiated that sports remained a hegemonic arena.

Only limited progress was enjoyed by females during the 1990s relative to their treatment by the media. The social construct of the male-dominated sports media reflected their overall negative perceptions about and evaluation of females as athletes. *Sports Illustrated* perpetuated the treatment of females as after-thoughts, rather than as central figures, in elite sports. The only exceptions were the occasional covers of female athletes primarily dressed in feminine attire.

The purpose of the annual *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue is to sell magazines. Despite outcries about the revealing nature of the bikinis worn by the supermodels or the plethora of negative letters to the editor about the inappropriateness of focusing on models in suggestive poses and revealing fashions in a sports magazine, the publisher of *Sports Illustrated* knows that treating scantily-clad women as "sex objects" sells.

Implications

The appearance of African Americans on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, especially in basketball and football, while reflective of their increasing domination in these sports was not reflective of their participation levels. The inequitable number of covers featuring African Americans in the top three team sports in comparison to their prevalence in these sports signaled that during the 1990s they continued to be victims of discriminatory treatment. It would appear that only African Americans who attained near superstar status were given the recognition of being pictured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*. The dearth of African American coaches, administrators, and owners and African

Americans' limited presence in sports other than in baseball, basketball, football, boxing, and track and field also lessened the likelihood of individuals of this race/ethnicity being pictured on a cover. It is noteworthy, however, that in those sports where African Americans were the overwhelming percentage of athletes in the 1990s, they still lagged behind in the number of covers, thus reinforcing the preferential selection of European Americans for the covers of *Sports Illustrated*.

Paralleling greater enforcement of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, females of all ages in the 1990s demonstrated their abilities to achieve at unprecedented levels on the playing field or court in intercollegiate and professional sports. Still, the media marginalized females in sports by limiting the amount and type of coverage provided them, suggested that the achievements of females were inferior when compared to those of male athletes, and emphasized their femininity rather than their sports accomplishments when they were mentioned. The finding that females only occasionally were pictured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* reaffirmed that females remained an anomaly at the pinnacle of sport, or the "other" relative to the sporting achievements of males.

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Dr. Lumpkin is a Professor in the Department of Health, Sport and Exercise Sciences at the University of Kansas.