Sex sells sports



by Andrew Renfree
The Gateway (University of Alberta)

EDMONTON (CUP) - Attractive athletes - the ones who get more attention for their looks than their skills, or even their skillz - actually benefit their respective sports more than most people give them credit for.

To highlight this, let's compare two sports: professional women's tennis and professional women's basketball. If I had $20, and gave a dollar to every person who could tell me who won the WNBA title this year, I'd probably still have enough cash to see a movie.

Women's tennis, on the other hand, has been gaining stature in the sports world, partly because its beauties receive so much media attention and fan interest. Maria Kirilenko, Maria Sharapova, Daniela Hantuchova and Anna Kournikova, to name a few, are a big reason why women's tennis is more popular than both the men's game and the WNBA combined.

The main benefit of attractive athletes in a sport is that they actually draw people to watch the sport. Many years ago, I thought that tennis sucked - plain and simple. If I wanted to hear two people grunting and whacking balls around, I would have rented a porno.

Then, players like Anna Kournikova became popular and I started watching tennis - and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why: she's hot! I would never have given that sport any of my time, but since I was drawn in, I've realized that tennis isn't all that bad.

This phenomenon isn't restricted to the tennis court, either. Another prime example of an attractive athlete helping her sport is Natalie Gulbis, a female golfer. Recently, Gulbis came to Edmonton with three other accomplished male golfers to put on a clinic. The bulk of the press coverage, however, wasn't devoted to the event but rather to Gulbis and her appealing attributes.

It wasn't as if she was golfing alongside a group of amateurs either. Tom Watson, who has amassed five British Open victories, two Masters victories and one U.S. Open title in his storied career, got only a fraction of the press coverage Gulbis did, and I'll bet you can guess why if you've read this far.

Gulbis also overshadowed Paul Azinger and Peter Jacobsen, who are both damn good golfers in their own right. The thing is, though, that golf is more excruciating to watch than tennis, and Gulbis' presence generated a lot of interest in the event and the sport of women's golf overall.

It's not only female athletes who leverage their sexuality to generate interest in a sport. For example, Sidney Crosby is used in advertisements for companies like Gatorade and Reebok all the time, while Alexander Ovechkin is relegated to endorse jock-itch medication.

This is despite the fact that this past season Ovechkin played better than Crosby, won the Calder Trophy for best rookie and plays for a more competitive team.

It sounds bizarre doesn't it? Crosby has become the poster-boy for the NHL not just for the fact that Gretzky told us he was the next big thing, but also because he comes from a marketable background and has a face that makes all the puck bunnies swoon.

Some may argue that focusing on athletes' appearances detracts from the game and degrades them as people. However, here's the bottom line: at the end of the day sports are just a form of entertainment and the sex factor only increases that entertainment.

Sports were founded on fair competition and rivalries between athletes, but today, sport is a business, and teams want to be as profitable as possible. If six years of business school has taught me anything, it's that people don't like losing money.

And that applies just as much to sports franchises as it does to McDonald's. For an owner of a sports team, or an advertiser for an individual sport like tennis or golf, the goal is to get as many people interested in the sport or athlete as possible.

The more people who are interested, the more revenue you see, and until this trend changes we'll keep seeing hot athletes as spokespeople for their sports. It's really a simple equation: sexy athletes equal more fans, which equals more money, which equals longevity of sports. I say, bring on the hotness; hell, if I looked like half of these athletes, I'd want to flaunt it, too.

Five quit Ryerson basketball team over cultural insensitivity

by Amit Shilton
The Eyeopener (Ryerson University)

TORONTO (CUP) - She is Ryerson University's reigning female athlete of the year. She's a former MVP of the women's basketball team. This was supposed to be the year for Amanda Redhead and the women's basketball team.

But now the all-star forward has decided to call it quits in her final year, along with four of her teammates, and file a formal complaint against head coach Sandra Pothier, accusing her of repeatedly making culturally insensitive remarks toward her players.

Josephine Agudo, 22, Julia Ounphongxay, 19, Vanessa Smardenka, 21, Danielle Williams, 18, and Redhead, 24, resigned from the team at different intervals throughout August, vowing only to return if the university fires Pothier.

Pothier has been ordered by Ryerson officials not to comment about any allegations while an investigation is underway - leaving her side of the story untold. But she did have high praises for the basketball prodigy, Redhead.

"I think Amanda is a great player and I have a lot of respect for her work ethic and I don't have anything negative to say about Amanda," Pothier said.

However, Redhead has a different view of Pothier, who has coached the team for 15 years. The former women's national team scout coached Ryerson to a 17-49 record during Redhead's time at Ryerson.

The conflict reached its peak during a player-coach meeting on July 26. Redhead has charged that in their meeting, Pothier said she respects the suggestions of male authority figures more than females due to the prevalence of single-parent families in the black community. It was the last straw in a three-year battle that has only gotten worse.

"I took that to heart," Redhead said. "When you lose respect for someone, you can't play for them. It doesn't matter whether or not you don't like them, you have to have a certain respect for them and obviously she doesn't have respect for who I am... So I said, 'you know what, 'F' it, I'm quitting.'"

Two weeks after Pothier allegedly made the comments to Redhead, Ounphongxay confronted the coach. Pothier defended herself, asking the player if she would take offence to the statement that all Asian people are sheltered and hide their feelings, Ounphongxay said.

"When we play, we represent our coach," said Ounphongxay, adding she doesn't feel she can represent Pothier. Ounphongxay said she "didn't grow up like every Asian kid," and doesn't appreciate the generalization.

Terry Haggerty, manager of inter-university sports, isn't willing to confirm or deny the allegations against his women's basketball coach.

"You're really going to get a 'no comment' from anybody here," Haggerty said. "That's an investigation completely separate from us and we don't interfere with the process."

David Dubois, director of sports and recreation, would only say that to his knowledge, there has never been any "big complaint or issue" with Pothier. But The Eyeopener has learned that similar allegations were made in 2001 and 2003.

In 2001, a formal plan to settle issues between coach and players was developed by Dubois and Pothier.

Victoria Owusu-Ampong, a former Ryerson women's basketball player, said in a statement to The Eyeopener that Pothier was often the source of conflicts within the team.

Other coaches dismissed the alleged infighting, saying tension is a part of any team.

"That's going to happen in any setting whether that's a basketball team, an office or a family," said assistant coach Jason Andrade. "There's always going to be people that drift off together for whatever reasons."

For Redhead, unity is the most important element to having a successful team.

"We're a team, and we're playing against another school. We have to show that we're together," Redhead said.

"On any team there's going to be some type of trouble, it's not going to be perfect... for me, it's after three years, and I'm just like, 'enough is enough.'"

Pothier is respected by many around the league for her experience with the game.

Brad Schur, Royal Military College's women's basketball coach, has watched Pothier from across the court for the past five years and holds her in high regard.

"I started on the men's side, so she's kind of helped me get my feet on the ground, so-to-speak, on the women's side. She's always been a great help that way, getting used to the women's game and helping to get to know people," Schur said.

Pothier and the players are still waiting for a resolution before the season begins in early November. Since the complaint was filed, neither side has received any definitive answers from legal counsel.

But Williams, who averaged 12.4 minutes per game last season, just wants to play again.

"I've been playing basketball for 10 years of my life," she said. "Every single year I've never had a break. That's what I do, I play basketball and I go to school. And this year, I'm only going to school. It just hurts that something I love has to go."

And Redhead, who is entering her final year studying public administration and governance, wants the issue resolved so she can find her way back to the court again.

"As a player, I'm so agitated because I know all of us, we love basketball and we all work hard," said Redhead.

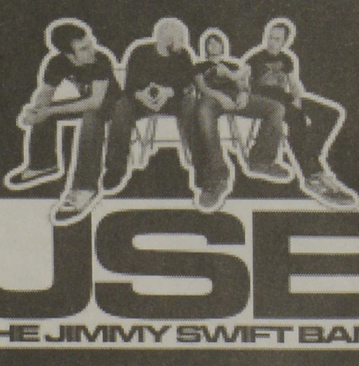
"And the thing that really, really agitates me is that this is not the first time... but why doesn't anybody do anything about it? No one says anything. Everybody's scared. Scared of what?"

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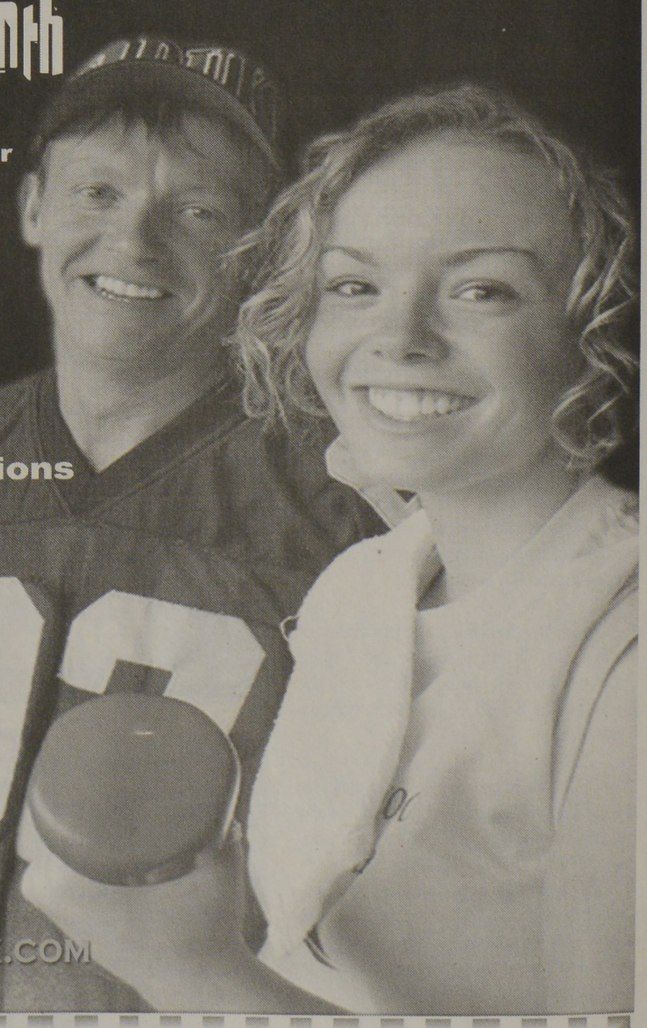
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