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Difference

By [Toby Miller](#)

"Get fit, get hot, start sooner, last longer, look cool, be loved. It's summer, so strip down!"

Incitements to look fit and be sexy are everywhere, with sport both a site for showing off and a source of having something to show off -- and not too much to hide. The most obvious sign of this development is the emergence of the "metrosexual," a term coined in the mid-1990s by queer British critic Mark Simpson after he had encountered "the real future" and found that "it had moisturized." In Simpson's words, the metrosexual 'might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference."



The metrosexual endorses equal-opportunity vanity, through cosmetics, softness, women, hair-care products, wine bars, gyms, designer

fashion, wealth, the culture industries, finance, cities, cosmetic surgery, and deodorants. Happy to be the object of queer erotics, and committed to exfoliation and web surfing, the metrosexual blurs the visual style of straight and gay in a restless search "to spend, shop and deep-condition." Midtown Manhattan now offers specialist ear-, hand-, and foot-waxing, with men comprising 40% of the clientele. Such sites provide pedicures and facials to the accompaniment of cable sports and Frank Sinatra, using manly euphemisms to describe procedures -- coloring hair becomes "camouflage," and manicures are "hand detailing."

And everyone's embodiment of the metrosexual? David Beckham. But it could equally be Yannick Noah, Francesco Totti, Robert Pires, Thierry Henry, Roger Federer, or Ruud Gullit. (Maybe Ronaldo, Ronaldhino, and Wayne Rooney need a little work). Even NASCAR promotes itself metrosexually. Noted driver Jeff Gordon told KTLA Morning News that "you need to smell good' in an environment of 'burning rubber and gasoline." He endorses wine, watches, and body spray. In case men aren't sure they rate,

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an on-line metrosexual quiz is available through ESPN. The average grade of the 100,000 who took it in its first year was 36.5%. I scored 54%, and qualified.

Sport and sex jumble together. They cannot be kept apart, for they live cheek by cheek, cheek by capital, torso by torso, torso by Totti, boot by boot, boot by Beckham -- just like the other major social categories that characterize sport -- age, race, class, religion, region, and nation. The paradox at the heart of sport, its simultaneously transcendent and imprisoning qualities, and its astonishing capacity to allegorize, is most obvious, most dangerous, and perhaps most transformative when it comes to sex. With the advent of consumer capitalism and postmodern culture, the body has become an increasingly visible locus of desire. The manipulation of appearance through fashion codes, bodily adornment, calculated nutrition, and physical conditioning has changed the daily terms of trade in the clothes we wear, the desires we feel, and the images we create and consume.

Sporting bodies are powerful symbols because they embody free will, self-control, health, productivity, and transcendence. In elite sport, sex sells, and it does so through style. Dennis Rodman appeared on the basketball court with many earrings, many hair colors and a queer persona. Amy Acuff, frustrated that her consistently brilliant high-jumping over many years had not brought public attention, competed in a fur halter top and fur-lined bikini pants, then gathered top women athletes together to create a nude calendar. Anne Langstaff, veteran ultramathoner and topless dancer, won sponsorship for her running career from her night-time employer, Dreamgirls of San Diego. And the movie Satree Lex, based on a real volleyball team almost entirely made up of cross-dressing men that won the Thai national amateur title in 1996, quickly became the country's second-highest grossing film. Why? Sport has always represented something beyond itself—and linked to sex.

MEN

Consider the nexus of men between male athletes, sex, and leadership in the Ancient World. Xenophon, Socrates, and Diogenes believed that sexual excess and decadence came from the equivalent of sporting success. In sex and sport, triumph could lead to failure, unless accompanied by regular examination of one's conscience, and physical training. Carefully modulated desire in both spheres became a sign of the ability to govern. Aristotle and Plato favored regular flirtations with excess, as tests as well as pleasures. The capacity of young men to move into positions of social responsibility was judged by charioteering and man-management, because their ability to win sporting dramas was akin to dealing with sexually predatory older males. Each

success showed fitness not only physically, but managerially.

The Ancient Olympics saw men competing naked. Only other men and virgin women were allowed to watch them. Centuries later, this masculinist lineage of leadership reasserted itself: when Pierre de Coubertin founded the modern Olympics, his goal was to follow the example of British muscular Christianity, and redeem French masculinity after the shocks of the Franco-Prussian War. During the same period, the late 19th-century popular novel *Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman* sees the story of a ruling-class British cricketer and jewel thief told by a male narrator through thinly coded admiration:

"Again I see him, leaning back in one of the luxurious chairs with which his room was furnished. I see his indolent, athletic figure; his pale, sharp, clean-shaven features; his curly black hair; his strong, unscrupulous mouth. And again I feel the clear beam of his wonderful eye, cold and luminous as a star, shining into my brain—sifting the very secrets of my heart."

Hmm. The male body is sport's everyday currency, and up for mockery as well fandom. Ann says Farley Granger "looks so silly in his tennis clothes" in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*. Or the great French libertine poet Charles Baudelaire, whose 1863 essay "The Dandy" refers to the dandy's need for "flawless dress at any time of day or night" as well as the capacity to perform "risky sporting feats." Sixty years later, marketing systems ushered in the notion of men as clothes horses by associating goods like corsets and services like hairdressing with sportsmen.

Sport has always licensed men to watch and dissect other men's bodies in fetishistic detail, a legitimate space for them to gaze on the male form without homosexuality alleged or feared. The fetish of admiring body parts ("look at those



triceps") gives a scientific pleasure and alibi. A man weightlifting gives off signs of pleasure-pain akin to facial correlatives of the male orgasm, a sight otherwise denied men defining themselves as straight. Some lifters say a good pump is 'better than coming'; no wonder turning tricks is as common in such gyms as the disavowal of homosexuality. And the English footballer Paul Ince famously compared tackling favorably with sex.

Consider swimming. On the one hand, it is regarded as masculine because of its self-sufficiency and demands for fitness, strength,

and skill. On the other, the sport's lack of violence, and the practice of shaving the legs and torso, mark it out from body-contact games and can lead to a "reputation." Gay swim meets play this up, often featuring a "pink flamingo relay" in which team members wear plastic flamingo hats and pull each other along, one kicking and the other stroking. And Olympic swimmers? There they are, cocks outlined in form-hugging briefs, body hair trimmed for minimal drag, lean, leggy, ducking, diving, turning, and speeding, seemingly oblivious to the gaze of others and the actions of fellow-competitors. Bug-eyed in goggles, their muscles strain with each eruption from the water. Our vision of them is from a multitude of angles -- warming up, swimming (seen from above and below the water), atop the podium in victory, and shivering in interviews. Through it all, we confront the uncomfortable sense of the male body straining whilst almost naked.

And what is going on with all that kinky medievalist sadomasochism and bondage named fencing, and half-naked men climbing over each other to wrestle and box? Then at the level of merchandise we see Michael Jordan selling his underwear and baseball player Rafael Palmeiro endorsing Viagra because he says that sex improves with preparation, just like fielding and hitting home runs.

As readers of this site are well aware, US football player David Kopay became the first major sportsman to come out as gay. His 1975 autobiography made the best seller list of the New York Times, but the paper did not review it, and a column about the book written by Pulitzer Prize winner Dave Anderson was rejected by management. Today, Kopay claims that many on-field brawls still result from players being called "fag," a sign of continued intolerance. Kopay was out to many teammates, finding particular solace from African Americans, whose knowledge of straight white male bigotry made them excellent confidants. He says obstacles lie with team owners, who believe openly gay players will lose them money through diminished sponsorship and ratings. Kopay calls for football associations and players' unions to issue civil-rights statements supporting gay athletes.

On the less savory side of sportsex, male violence is often seen as a hormonal danger that can be pacified and redirected through sport into an appropriate sphere. But there is a strong link (sometimes proven, sometimes not) between sex, sport, and violence: commentator/athlete OJ Simpson and jealous murder, Australian rugby league teams and rape, and basketball player Kobe Bryant and boxer Mike Tyson with rape. Consider the moment when the logical-positivist philosopher AJ Ayer was at a Manhattan party hosted by underwear designer Fernando

Sanchez. A woman ran in and said her friend was being assaulted in another room. Ayer went to investigate, and reportedly encountered an aroused Tyson forcing himself on a distraught Naomi Campbell. Ayer warned Tyson to desist. Tyson retorted: "Do you know who the fuck I am? I'm the heavyweight champion of the world." To which Ayer replied: "I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic. We are both preeminent in our field; I suggest we talk about this like rational men." Then there is the obvious link between hyper-masculinity and football-spectator violence -- the so-called hooligans of Germany, the Netherlands, and England.

Sport is frequently -- and correctly -- criticized as a symbol of male power, because it superficially embodies the physical disparities in strength between men over women. Consider the male domination of FIFA and the IOC, with administrators like Sepp Blatter calling for women footballers to wear more revealing costumes to stir up media interest. But a brutality towards the self is there, too. Alan Klein describes men pumping iron in a gym:

"The first time I witnessed a bodybuilder suffer a nosebleed while lifting weights it was triumphantly explained to me that the man in question was a true bodybuilder, paying dues, training in earnest and willing both to risk and to endure injury for his calling. Sometime later, when I watched another bodybuilder doubled over in pain from what would later be diagnosed as a symptom of hepatic tumors on the liver, it was again interpreted by the behemoths in the gym as testimony to his commitment to the subculture. In both cases I watched men reinterpret signs of clear and present danger to their health as ringing endorsements of character."

Clearly, there are costs as well as benefits to this hyper-masculinity. In 1998, the late NFL Green Bay Packers "hero" and fundamentalist faith-man Reggie White appeared suited up in newspaper advertisements against gays in sport paid for by the Christian right wing. Then he wrote a 1999 op-ed piece for the Wall Street Journal protesting "female reporters and camerawomen ogling guys in the locker room," showing his anxiety when all-male shrines are visited by the very people he professes to view as the only true partners in life.

WOMEN



Women have routinely been excluded from sport for reasons to do with sex. In the late nineteenth century, gynecologists debated whether women should play tennis during menstruation, and biologically



derived alibis for restricting women's participation in sport have continued. Medical articles and educational manuals frequently discouraged activities coded as masculine. During the inter-War period, the American Medical Association worried that basketball could impede "the organic vitality of a growing girl," placing undue strain on the uterus. Into the

1940s, tennis was deemed risky because it was thought to promote over-development of abdominal muscles, which might hinder childbirth. The corollary was that competing without regard to one's cycle was somehow to be less a woman. There are links to styles of play -- by the 1960s, men were using power via a serve-and-volley game or vicious topspin, while women emphasized grace and finesse.

Women were not admitted to track and field events at the Olympics until 1928, in response to a separatist event in 1922, and were not permitted to run further than 200 meters at the Games until 1960, while the marathon and the pole vault only became legitimate in the 1980s and '90s, and the IOC excluded women from its numbers until 1981. Playboy featured figure skater Katarina Witt in a December 1998 nude pictorial, part of her successful sale of sexuality -- but tennis champion Martina Navratilova lost major endorsements when her lesbianism became public.

The recent turn towards strong bodies as female fashion statements, for all the associated rhetoric of empowerment, makes the body into three questions -- is it still female, is it still feminine, and is it drug-enhanced? After defeating world No.1 Lindsay Davenport in the 1999 Australian Open Tennis semi-finals, Amélie Mauresmo "leapt into the arms of girlfriend Sylvie Bourdon and was cradled with hugs." Throughout the match, Bourdon had been "pumping her fists and yelling, 'Allez.' "

Following a whirlwind romance, begun just a month or two earlier, they had moved in together and embarked on a joint workout régime of several hours weightlifting each week. Now they were on tour. Davenport had attained the world number one ranking by developing a style suited to her 6 feet 2 inches of height and marked strength. She was defeated at her own game. Although 5 inches shorter, Mauresmo prevailed due to her superb physical condition, a fast and accurate serve, and a hard topspin forehand (traditionally used only by male players). Until her victory, the media had barely noticed Mauresmo, even though she had been world junior champion in 1996. But after the post-match media conference, Mauresmo became front-page news, because

Davenport said:

"A couple of times, I mean, I thought I was playing a guy, the girl was hitting so hard, so strong ... she is so strong in those shoulders and she just hits the ball very well ... I mean, she hits the ball not like any other girl. She hits it so hard and with so much topspin. ... Women's tennis isn't usually played like that."

French television satirists made a puppet with Mauresmo's head on Arnold Schwarzenegger's body, accompanied by this voice-over: "It's the first time in the history of French sport that a man says he is a lesbian." French lesbian groups rallied behind her, and after a few years of up-and-down play she has emerged as a major champion in the past 18 months.

CONCLUSION

Change is afoot and contradictions are aplenty in sport and sex. It's not just women who are objects of the gaze, not just women who are physically damaged in the interests of social expectations, and not just men who are inspecting the bodies of others for foibles and follicles. In the past three decades, professional male sport has transformed itself into an internationalist capitalist project—and new pressures accompany the spoils. As part of the desire to address TV spectators and capture their attention for advertisers, the male body has become an object of lyrical rhapsody -- and the gaze of gay and female money. It is up for grabs as both sexual icon and commodity consumer. Sculpted features, chiseled waste-lines, well-appointed curves, dreamy eyes, administered hair, and an air of casual threat that does not need traditional machismo to electrify. These are the currency of the day. But like beauty and fitness of all kinds, the years will attenuate them. Age will weary them. But sportsex will just identify new names, new bodies, new Eros, new Euros.

Toby Miller's book *SportSex* came out in 2001. He lives in Venice Beach and teaches sociology and cultural studies at the University of California, Riverside.

Photos: Male swimmer and runner by Finneye. Female swimmer by Brent Mullins.

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