

COMMENTARY:

SWIMSUIT ISSUE EMBODIES TRADITIONAL VIEW OF BEAUTY

BY TERRY TODD AND JOHN HOBERMAN

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Preface: Between 1988 and 1992 Terry and his good friend, U.T. sports historian John Hoberman, wrote a column in the Austin American-Statesman newspaper on Sundays. Their sports commentaries covered a wide variety of controversies such as drugs in sport, Olympic scandals, basketball coach Bobby Knight's bad behavior, and many things related to University of Texas Athletics. Terry and John alternated writing the columns, each choosing a topic/controversy that interested them personally. They then sent drafts to each other for proofreading before submitting to the paper. The main writer's name was placed first on the columns they initiated so readers would know whether John or Terry had done the heavy lifting that week.

After he began writing for Sports Illustrated in the late 1970s, Terry suggested to the magazine that they do a feature story about how the bodies of women athletes were adapting in the post-Title IX world as more women participated in sport. Many women had started weight training to be better at their sport, he argued, and because of this the bodies of women athletes were leaner and more muscular, reflecting a growing acceptance of muscularity by women athletes and the public. Terry was given the greenlight to write the article, and in 1983, he and SI photographer Stephen Green-Armytage went on assignment to interview and photograph several of America's best Olympians (Joan Lind—rowing, Lorna Griffin—discus, and Evelyn Ashford—track) along with Patty Barton, a female jockey, and Denise Christensen, a collegiate diver. The pictures turned out beautifully. Terry's editor loved his text. However, the story was never published by Sports Illustrated. It was scheduled several times, but always got bumped. Finally, his editor, Barbara La-Fontaine, called to tell Terry that her boss, SI's Managing Editor, had decided it would never run because he thought it would add fuel to the controversy that already existed in this era about Sports Illustrated's policy of using only fashion models in the Swimsuit Issue. To describe how Terry and Stephen felt after getting this news as "disappointment" would be a gross understatement.

This commentary in the American-Statesman was inspired by this earlier attempt to get Sports Illustrated to begin treating female athletes seriously, and by Terry's own belief that it was wrong not to celebrate the beauty of women athletes.

~ Jan Todd



The *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue came this week and, as usual, it was cause for contemplation. This particular issue provides a retrospective look at the 25 years the magazine has featured a photographic layout of young women in various stages of undress, and one of the things that can be learned by looking at the earlier models is that the body

style of 1989 is quite different than it was back in the middle 60s. The primary reason this is so has to do with the dramatically altered relationship of women and athletics.

One of the realizations that accompanied the sweeping changes symbolized by Title IX which mandated that any educational institution receiving federal money had to provide support for women athletes as well as for



Terry and John Hoberman sit together at an academic meeting held at The University of Texas in 2003. Hoberman, who teaches in the Germanic Studies Department, is one of the world's most distinguished sport historians and specializes in the history of sport science and drug use in sports. His most recent book is *Dopers in Uniform: The Hidden World of Police on Steroids* (University of Texas Press, 2017).

men was that as a culture we had sustained an enormous loss of talent and beauty because of our traditional attitude about women and athletics. As the fields, courts and weight rooms of the country began to fill with young women avid for a chance to play, it became increasingly clear that the traditional notion about a woman's place being in the home, rather than rounding third and headed there, was ill-conceived.

To have denied women the opportunity to live not only in their bodies but through them, as men have lived, seems to have been not unlike restricting Babe Ruth to the mound. The philosopher W. Jennings once remarked that the only two things in life that make it worth living are a guitar that's tuned good, and firm-feeling women, even though the "good-hearted women-good-timing man" philosophy with which he is usually identified would result in women who were decidedly nonfirm. Even infirm, since it holds that man is an oak to which a woman should cling, vinelike, for support. But this hard-soft, either-or sexual politics fails to take into account two crucial facts one: the bodies of both men and women respond to the rigors of physical exercise by becoming stronger, more flexible, more enduring or some combination thereof; and two: women, no less than men, can be ennobled by sport.

It is not necessary to believe that men and women are the same to understand that in many respects they are similar. For instance, part of what makes a man or woman "attractive" is the grace, shape and coherence of his or her particular body. Any general definition of beauty will argue that it is the relationship of the parts to the whole which is crucial; that absolute beauty exists only when any alteration of any part diminishes the effect of the whole. That this is theoretically no less true of a woman's body than of Don Budge's backhand seems obvious. What is becoming increasingly obvious is that a woman can be both beautiful and strong. What is less obvious is that the earned beauty many of our top sportswomen develop could be more aesthetically interesting than the generally accepted standard.

Most of what for want of a better word can be called "cheesecake" depends on a passive sexiness and either nudity or near-nudity for its appeal. And most women who are the photographic subjects of this "cheesecake" look the way they look (pre-implants, anyway) primarily because of their ancestry.

World class women athletes, on the other hand, have bodies which represent not only genetic good fortune but the effect of their will. Perhaps the measure of special beauty such women possess springs from the related facts that, as athletes, their bodies must move free of wasted motion and that this beautiful function creates the sort of form we regard as an aspect of beauty. They, unlike the average *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model, have in a very real sense designed, through the demands of their sport, how their bodies look.

This difference probably represents their yearning for perfection as part of the human condition. It's indeed ironic, and sad, that a magazine with the prestige, circulation and focus of *Sports Illustrated* would choose to overlook such women, in action, in favor of the ones they use, no matter how genetically blessed or surgically enhanced the models may be.

One of the profound changes our culture is experiencing involves the fact that in the very recent past most women who were dedicated athletes were willing to accept the physical differences their sport produced as part of the price they had to pay in exchange for the pleasure of play, whereas many sportswomen today embrace the differences proudly, seeing in them the result of their years of training. In the musky presence of such athletes a line from a letter George Bernard Shaw wrote to his friend William Archer praising Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler* comes to mind. "I say Archer, my God! What women!"