

An Examination of The Sport, Gender, Race, and Sporting Role of Individuals Appearing on The Covers of *Sports Illustrated*, 1954–1987

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The purpose of this study was to examine the sport, gender, race, and sporting role of the individuals who appeared on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* between July, 1954, and December, 1989. Descriptive statistics (chi squares) yielded frequencies by two races, by gender, by ten selected sports, by five sporting roles, and by four decades. Women seldom appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Only 89 issues, or 6% of the 1436 covers, containing a member of a single gender featured a woman on the cover. Women depicted on the cover most frequently participated in “sex-appropriate” sports such as golf, ice skating, tennis, track, skiing, and swimming. Tennis had the highest frequency of female athletes followed by golf. Tennis and golf were the only sports depicting women which also ranked among the top six sports for men. The presence of women during the first two decades, the 1950s and the 1960s, accounted for more than 68% of the women on the covers. Therefore, females appeared less frequently on the covers during the 1970s and 1980s which were decades that supposedly offered a more favorable environment and greater acceptance of sportswomen.

Overwhelmingly, white male athletes dominated the cover athletes. Black male athletes appeared on less than 35% of the male athlete covers. Football, baseball, and basketball players accounted for almost 75% of all the sporting activities for men. White male athletes appeared on 75% of the baseball covers and on 67% of the football covers. The perception of basketball as a “black man’s sport” was reinforced by their appearance on 62% of the basketball covers. Boxing, which achieved its highest occurrences during the 1960s and 1970s, had the highest percentage (75%) of black males. Tennis and golf covers were almost exclusively white.

Over the years, *Sports Illustrated* changed: the subject of the cover reflected a shift to mass media athletes, an exclusion of women during the last two decades, and an increasing presence of black sportsmen. The findings of this study reemphasizes how this sport magazine, like others, publicized and reinforced perceived sport roles and stereotypes of blacks and women.