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The Fat Sporting Body: The Reification and Rejection of the Fat Athlete in *Sports Illustrated*

As recent Newsweek and Time magazine covers sound the alarm about obesity and its attendant health risks, the fat sporting body might appear a contradiction in terms. Although fat once held positive connotations (wealth, health), the rise of American consumer culture in the 1920s led to a rejection of fat and to the conflation of slenderness and health, not to mention beauty. At the turn of the century, medicine and the mass media advocated physical activity for women, in large part to promote reproductive health. The ideal female form at the turn of the century, with help from corset and bustle, included curves and some flesh on the bones. However, the Victorian image gave way to the Gibson Girl, who was more overtly "sporty" and noticeably more slender (though a larger woman by today's standards). Nonetheless, the emergence of the consumer culture, advertisements and magazines exhorted women to focus on and polish their physical appearance as opposed to sporting involvement and competency. With the exception of a brief hiccup in the 1950s, with the popularity of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, the thin body, including some adjustment (e.g. the introduction of the aerobicized slender body in the 1980s, followed by the further demand for full breasts) has remained the ideal until the present. (While men are subjected to standards of thinness, in her book The Beauty Myth, feminist scholar Naomi Wolf contends that women are more harshly measured against those standards than men.)

Utilizing a cultural and media studies perspective, this paper examines the presentation of the fat, athletic body in Sports Illustrated (SI) magazine, from 1969 to 2000 – to question how SI cover images, cover stories and feature articles reify and/or reject the fat sporting body. Given the role of gender in the social construction of the body, the exploration of the fat athletic body inevitably addresses how gender impacts the categorization/characterization of the fat body. Despite the negative connotations associated with fat and fatness, male athleticism has the potential to mediate/transform those meanings, whereas female athletic ability generally fails to override the

negativity of fatness. The occasional celebration of the fat male athlete demonstrates the contested nature of the body, how meanings are created and challenged by participants, spectators and the media. In addition, the interrogation of the sporting body and fat/fatness, illuminate how standards for athleticism can be informed by non-athletic ability, by interrelations of gender, body size and standards of beauty: ironically, in an arena frequently defined/articulated as merit and outcome based.
