



# Editorial

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## Endorsement by 'looks': measuring gender bias

We were approached by a journalist recently, asking about sponsorship of women's sport. In particular they wanted to know what proportion of sponsorship spend went to women's sport and which brands were most active.

IMR has a major international sponsorship database recording thousands of deals, so it was a relatively easy question to answer, notwithstanding the fact that some rights holders, such as the IOC, cover both men's and women's sports with no specified sponsorship receipts according to gender.

Basically, however, women's sport overall receives a tiny fraction of the sponsorship allocated to men's sport. So the next question is why? Is this simply because women's sport has a much lower profile, or is it also because sponsoring companies are not funding women's sport in proportion to its popularity? Finally, which brands show a positive appreciation of women's sport and what should sponsors in general be doing?

Certainly there is no doubt that men's sport has a hugely higher profile than women's sport. In the world's major sports such as soccer, NFL, basketball, baseball, golf, rugby and cricket, it is the men's code that has mass exposure and indeed in many cases there are no professional leagues for women. Historically and culturally the reasons for this cannot be linked to sponsorship – it was the case before sponsorship became a serious marketing tool and sponsors have only a limited role in developing the popularity of any sport. Media coverage is far more important in this respect.

However, the UK organisation Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) found that women's sport (in the UK) received 7% of media coverage of sport but

only 0.4% of sponsorship. Globally this is consistent with IMR findings.

A look at individual athlete earnings is perhaps also instructive. On Forbes' list of best paid athletes (which includes salaries) only two women (Maria Sharapova at position 26 and Serena Williams, position 47) make it into the top 100.

In terms of endorsement earnings, Maria Sharapova eclipses Williams by \$23m to \$13m despite Williams having had approximately twice the success career-wise as her rival. The question of why this is the case is complicated as there could also be an element of racial bias against Williams, although in sport's elite at least, this doesn't seem to be a major issue. The likes of Tiger Woods, LeBron James, Kevin Durant, Kobe Bryant and Usain Bolt are among the very highest endorsement earners.

What has always been clear, however, is that female athletes conforming to western stereotypes of what is 'good looking' have proportionally had significantly higher endorsement earnings than men. That's why Anna Kournikova, despite not being the top player in her era, was able to secure much bigger deals than her more successful rivals. In men's sport, it would be naïve to say that looks don't count – hence David Beckham's commercial success, which was way out of proportion to his ability; but on the whole, endorsement earnings are fairly closely linked to sporting success. Golfer Phil Mickelson, for example, ranks third in global endorsement earnings despite not being used by sponsors as a fashion icon.

It is interesting to look at who does sponsor women's sport and why. One of the biggest rights holders in women's sport is the Women's Tennis



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Association (WTA). Its primary sponsors are SAP, Xerox, Dubai Duty Free and sports supplement brand Usana. It could be argued that SAP and Xerox are very progressive sponsors who acknowledge that women have a growing role in business decision-making. Does, however, the backing of Dubai Duty Free (shopping) and Usana, which makes dietary supplements, revert to stereotypes about women? Certainly Usana could point to the fact that it also has rights in men's tennis, although not of the equivalent profile. Likewise, Dubai Duty Free has numerous rights in men's sports. The WTA might justify its choice of partners based on the fact that it needs to maintain revenues to sustain the growth of women's tennis – but does this mean that it should carefully consider those companies? Is it the job of the WTA to promote a positive image of women as well as women's tennis?

The same question applies to sponsors. Being private companies, sponsors are accountable to their shareholders and their primary role is to maximise a return to those shareholders. As such, they could argue that it is not their responsibility to promote a more positive image of women in general and women

in sport in particular – this is an issue for society at large. To an extent, that argument holds water but with a major caveat. Sponsors are part of society at large; indeed, they are a relatively powerful force in society in that they communicate – often on a mass scale. They have a choice as to who they sponsor and how they activate their sponsorships.

From a commercial point of view sponsors should also perhaps consider that in general a large proportion of their market and employees are likely to be women. In the long term, those companies that take a more progressive attitude to issues in society tend to be remembered for their forward thinking. This enhances the brand – and sponsorship is often primarily used for just for that.

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