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GENDER, SPORT AND THE BODY POLITIC

Framing Femininity in the *Golden Girls of Sport* Calendar and *The Atlanta Dream*

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Abstract This article compares the *Golden Girls of Sport* calendar, which was ostensibly launched to provide Australian women competing in the 1996 Olympic Games with greater access to the media, with a special issue of *black+white* magazine, titled *The Atlanta Dream,* which featured Australian men and women competitors at the Olympic Games in Atlanta. The two publications are analysed in the context of gender theory, with particular focuses on the social construction of gendered bodies and the different ways that femininity and masculinity are represented in the mass media.

Key words • Australia • body • femininity • gender • mass media • representation

Recent feminist theory concentrates on 'reading' the body as having material, historical, and cultural dimensions. Grosz (1994: x) argues that 'representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce [and re-produce] them as such'. We are simultaneously products and agents of change both in and through our bodies. This viewpoint questions the idea that we are constituted through a fixed body/mind dualism (feminine body versus masculine mind), which translates into the binary opposition of masculine/feminine (Cranny-Francis, 1995; Grosz, 1994; Wearing, 1996). From this perspective, the embodiment of the subject and the formation of gender identity is layered and shifting, not a fixed category (Braidotti, 1993). The body itself is not an empty shell which has gender placed into it; rather it forms a basis for, and actively contributes towards, social relations (Shilling, 1993).

The construction of the gendered body has been a focus of various theorists, who challenge the male, and thereby normative, model of sport (Cole, 1993; Hall, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Lenskyj, 1994; Loy et al., 1993; McKay, 1994). Sportswomen are often considered aberrant not only due to prescribed social and cultural roles of masculinity and femininity, but also through the way gendered bodies are used to designate areas of sport that exclude women (Hall, 1996).

Thus, sport is both constituted by, and constitutive of, other social settings which tend to be bifurcated as being 'naturally' suited to males (e.g. public and private sector management, politics, and the defence forces) or females (e.g. the domestic sphere, childcare, the fashion and beauty industry and service industries) (Bryson, 1994; Wearing, 1996). The social construction of hierarchical differences between males/females (and accordingly gendered as masculine/feminine) has determined the subordinate position of women to men in society.

Bodies are central to social and cultural relations. We are not only gendered via 'natural', biological reasons but also through the socially constructed, gendered ideals which operate both on and through our bodies. As Butler (1990: 139) observes, 'the body is not a "being", but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy'. Our bodies are inscribed with meanings, but these meanings are constantly shifting and fluid. Butler argues that the performance of gender is assigned through a repetition of acts that constitute us as masculine and feminine. Gender as a performative act is 'not a reified concept but a *practice* which gains credence through repetition' (Cranny-Francis, 1995: 31; emphasis added). In other words, Butler's idea of performance is not one of 'masquerade' but consists of the compulsory repetition of norms that inform a gendered subject. This idea in no way precludes individual agency within the production of shifting and fluid gender identity. Performativity acknowledges that individuals have agency through the potentiality of variations in repetition. However, such agency can only occur within the boundaries of the discourse and power conditions in which they exist (Butler, 1995: 136–7).

We draw on these theoretical perspectives in order to analyse two items that recently were widely circulated in the Australian print media: the second *Golden Girls of Sport* calendar and a special issue of *black + white* magazine entitled *The Atlanta Dream*. We will assess the *Golden Girls of Sport* calendar (hereafter referred to as the *GG* calendar) by utilizing feminist theory focusing on the construction of gender and the gendered body. Specifically, we will be investigating how femininity and masculinity are constituted and reproduced in and by popular culture. More specifically, we will address several key questions. How does the *GG* calendar, through a 'normalizing regime', attempt to position athletic female bodies as the site of heterosexual pleasure, beauty and glamour (Hall, 1996)? What is hidden or excluded from the representations in the *GG* calendar, and how is a gender identity produced through this construction? Why is there a need to designate a stereotyped 'femininity' to sportswomen and what is its relation to the masculine sports model?

To understand the meanings of the *GG* calendar, and *The Atlanta Dream*, we will undertake a semiotic reading of an image from each publication, using the theories of Kuhn (1985, 1988) and Pollock (1990), followed by an analysis of gender drawing from Butler's (1990) treatise on 'performance'. The work of Kuhn and Pollock is useful as it highlights the cultural significance and meanings of media images within popular culture. More specifically, their theories show how representations produce meaning through processes of signification, and how this signification functions within culturally constituted social relations.

The *Golden Girls* Calendar

In 1996 Jane Flemming, an Australian heptathlete and hurdler of international calibre, launched the second *Golden Girls of Sport* calendar (the first calendar was published in 1995). According to its supporters, the calendar gave women's sport in general, and the featured female athletes in particular, publicity and personal profiles that they had earned, yet had been unable to secure through the traditional media outlets in Australia (Beers, 1995; Mikosza, 1997; Phillips, 1997). Although it can be argued that the *GG* calendar is read differently depending on subject-position, its form and content are strikingly similar to that of both the special swimsuit issue and swimsuit calendar published by the American magazine *Sports Illustrated* and Australia's glossy monthly magazine *Inside Sport*, both of which are designed to appeal primarily to white, heterosexual males (Davis, 1997; Jefferson Lenskyj, 1998). For example, the *GG* calendar uses the traditional format of the 'girlie' calendar in its depiction of 13 different women from 11 Olympic sports. The copy juxtaposes large colour images of the women modelling in skimpy or transparent swimsuits, underwear and evening gowns with small action shots in the lower left corner. The posed photographs, as opposed to the action shots, are the focal point in the calendar. The photographs were taken by Bambi, a female photographer who also is known for her images of some of the 'sports models' in *Inside Sport*, a magazine that shares the same publishing house as *Australian Penthouse*, which is run by Susan Horowitz. The complicity of women like Bambi, Horowitz, Flemming and the sportswomen who posed for the *GG* calendar supports Jefferson Lenskyj's (1998: 20–1) assertion that gendered analyses of the sporting media need to move from a simplistic 'villains and victims' approach toward more nuanced examination of specific technologies of domination and subordination. It is assumed that Flemming and Bambi recognized that the calendar was a commodity and the bodies portrayed in it were marketable items. We argue that what is being sold is a culturally normative and conservative ideal of femininity — that of the posed, manufactured fashion model.

Reading the *Golden Girls* Calendar

The typical image in the *GG* calendar we have selected for a detailed reading is of swimmer Hayley Lewis. Lewis, an internationally successful (recently retired) swimmer, is photographed from the lower thighs up, standing front-on to the camera and dressed in white underwear and red shorts. She wears heavily applied cosmetics with red lipstick on her mouth, which is slightly parted. As Pollock (1990: 217) notes, 'Redness, fullness, a suspicion of a tongue signify at the level of connotation, within a discourse associated with pornography.' Lewis' red lips draw the viewer's eye to her red shorts, unbuttoned to the crotch area, with her thumbs hooked through the belt holders on the shorts. Along with her stance, front-on to the camera with her legs apart, this gesture appears to suggest a sense of toughness which is not reflected in her 'come-on' sexual facial expression. The pose makes her appear as though she is in the process of stripping off her clothes

for the viewer. Underneath the red shorts she is wearing white underwear with the name 'Calvin Klein' clearly shown on the elastic. White connotes innocence or purity, but in this case it is presented on a woman in a sexualized pose with red shorts on top, possibly suggesting that she is young but sexually aware and available. The 'big-name' designer printed on the underwear provides the viewer with the knowledge that Lewis is very classy and fashionable. The background of the page is a photograph of blue water, and the entire image is red, white and blue, possibly signifying the Australian flag. However, an alternative reading may combine the American designer underwear with the red, white and blue of the American flag, connoting that Lewis is a 'world-class competitor' and a sexually experienced and 'worldly' woman. This reading would negate the white 'innocence' of the underwear and justify her sexual pose and expression; she is displaying a passive and sexualized femininity, inviting the viewer to see her as a sexual object.

The photographs in the *GG* calendar can be described as 'soft-porn', with codes such as long styled hair, cosmetics and poses connoting the sexualized female. Kuhn (1985: 38) describes this genre of pin-up images: 'There is a circumscribed, almost rigid, set of codes or conventions of representations of the body in this type of photograph, conventions with which even the most naive spectator is likely to be familiar.' Generally, the female body is angled towards the camera, with the woman acknowledging a spectator by looking at the camera, her breasts accentuated by placement of arms and angle of the body (Kuhn, 1985: 38–41). The cultural meanings in the photographs acquire a degree of naturalization (Kuhn, 1985: 38) and the *GG* calendar subscribes to the particular codes and conventions that produce a 'natural' femininity which views woman as sexually active and available.

A disruption occurs in the reading of these texts when the small action images are taken into account. In the case of Lewis, the action sporting photograph is labelled 'Swimming' and has her significant swimming achievements listed below. The juxtaposition of these two images sets up a message that her femininity is somehow negated when acting as an athlete: her perceived essential femininity only becomes apparent when posing sexually for the camera. The smaller active photograph shows a swimmer with signs of physical exertion in her expression, without any of the cultural signifiers of femininity: make-up, long hair and breasts. The crucial point is the dichotomy between the perceived feminine and non-feminine, as the dominant positioning of one image to another disrupts the possibilities of an active, powerful notion of femininity. The 'woman-as-athlete' image influences how the model poses can be interpreted, in showing that the woman can only be a sexualized woman *or* an athlete — as an active athlete she is no longer considered sexual. The juxtaposition of the large photograph and the stylized, posed stereotype of femininity with the active female athlete in the smaller image — *even though in her swimsuit Lewis would show more flesh than she does in the calendar* — suggests that Lewis is somehow less feminine as an active muscular athletic body. To live up to an assumed feminine ideal, she presents herself as a model, in a highly stylized norm of femininity.

Various 'props' are used to provide an exclusionary and stereotyped, stylized

ideal as femininity is 'mapped onto the body by cosmetics, fabric, fashion, which echo definitions of femininity as "masquerade"' (Pollock, 1990: 212). In this instance, the 'masquerade' occurs within the textual representation of femininity in the calendar and is emphasized by the smaller action photographs in the corners of the page, which is evidence of the athletes 'doing' sport. These sportswomen 'perform' a femininity in the larger posed photographs that is assumed to be absent when they are competing as athletes. When Jane Flemming states that the intention of producing the calendar was to show that 'muscles can be feminine' (Bell, 1996: 48), the masquerade in the photographs becomes even more obvious. In an attempt to show that muscles do not 'masculinize' the female athlete, the images of the passively posed female athletes play down any athletic strength that may be on show. Flemming is acknowledging that to be feminine is to be passive and accepting of the codes and conventions that constitute femininity in western culture.

In the act of producing a stylized form of femininity, and the ensuing disruption between the representations of shifting gender identities, the *GG* calendar is an example of the fluidity and 'temporality' of socially constituted gender identity:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *a stylized repetition of acts* . . . in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity . . . (Butler, 1990: 140–1)

If gender, as Butler believes, is not a 'stable identity' but one which is constituted through various repetitions of acts that allow us the belief that we are masculine or feminine, then the juxtaposition of active versus passive photographs in the *GG* calendar discloses a fear of the athletes transgressing their femininity through the engagement in activities within an androcentric arena. The highly stylized and culturally normative femininity on display says much about the exclusion of women from sport, and the perceived threat of women entering what is a male-dominated field. The photographs also reveal the conception of gender as a 'constituted social temporality'. The discontinuity that appears when viewing the active and passive images disrupts the supposedly seamless performance of gender and reveals the contingence and construction of gender identity.

Superficially, the active and passive images could be read as a statement of feminine identity being fluid and transforming from one to the other. However, an ambiguous dichotomy operates from the size of the posed passive image and calendar format in comparison to the much smaller photographs of the active women. The size of the posed images and the calendar format emphasize both the passivity and the sexualization of woman. The binary opposition and norms of masculine and feminine that are given meaning in the calendar virtually preclude any positive reading of the latter. Finally, the addition of smaller photographs of

active women emphasizes a fear of compromising their femininity through pursuing activities that require strength, agility and toughness. This highlights the stereotyped ideal that these traits are masculine and their complementary traits are feminine; it perpetuates a binary opposition which negates and 'others' women.

Flemming's intention in producing the *GG* calendar was to 'convince girls that taking part in athletics didn't mean becoming "all masculine looking"' (Huxley, 1994: 7). This justification of the calendar cuts to the core of the gendered nature of sport. Women who participate in the male domain of sport, an institution constructed by and for men (Hargreaves, 1994; Hall, 1996), and women who compete in sports outside those which confirm traditional notions of 'femininity', are often socially marginalized, being chided for appearing too 'masculine' (Lenskyj, 1994). Flemming's rationale is similar to other female athletes who attempt to 'over-compensate' for their perceived 'loss' of gender identity by emphasizing cultural feminine signifiers (Carlisle Duncan, 1990). The *GG* calendar is supposedly 'sexy' (that is, sexy = feminine = passive) while simultaneously affirming the genre of the 'girlie' calendar.

Although the calendar tacitly promotes the current 'backlash' against feminism in Australia (McKay, 1997), it is the construction of femininity or its framework that is crucial to understanding how the calendar works against gender equity in sport. Conventional representations of gender are based upon feminine characteristics (and by default masculine characteristics, for whatever a man 'is', a woman cannot 'be', and vice versa) that define a specific framing of femininity. In the case of the *GG* calendar, the women selected for the pictorial spreads are toned, strong and lean athletes, who display characteristics that signify femininity: long hair, cosmetics, skimpy costumes and passive posing. The visual representations of these women are important, as the photographs allow us to define a sense of 'reality'. Photographs present an aura of reality through their seeming naturalness (Carlisle Duncan, 1990). The 'naturalness' makes photography 'a particularly powerful ideological context for legitimation' (Carlisle Duncan, 1990: 23), and it constructs differences between men and women, through constituting certain aspects of masculinity and femininity as 'natural' and 'real' (Kuhn, 1985; Tagg, 1988). As Betterton (1987: 7) argues: 'The visual is particularly important in the definition of femininity, both because of the signification attached to images in modern culture and because a woman's character and status are frequently judged by her appearance.' The presentation of these women in the calendars ensure the focus is on their femininity, not their athletic ability. In this way the calendar defines a normative ideal of femininity through the signifiers of hair, lips, eyes, pose and look. This ideal is achieved through culture's continual and fluid reproduction of gender, through and by its representations.

Another crucial aspect in analysing the feminine ideal operating in the *GG* calendar is who is rendered invisible. Betterton (1987: 7) makes the point that, 'visual discourses also work to privilege certain social values and meanings while excluding others'. Those athletes made visible in the calendar are white, heterosexual, young and able-bodied women who possess very specific body types: athletic, lean and small framed. In the calendar, this construction of femininity

renders invisible 'women of different race, sexual preference . . . [and] physical ability' (Betterton, 1987: 7). In essence, the calendar selected a narrow segment of the female population with specific athletic somatotypes and combined them with 'feminine' signifiers to define the 'ideal' female athlete.

Who, then, were the athletes not found in the calendar? Athletes excluded were outside the selected segment of the female population, as well as large women and those who did not fit into the 'feminine' model appropriate for the calendar. An example is Australian Olympic medallist shot-putter Daniela Costian, who was not even asked to pose in the calendar because she did not fit the 'proper' female body type (Bell, 1996: 48). This exclusion also shows how our bodies are inscribed with social and cultural meaning and expectations. Our cultural mainstream media ensures that Costian is dismissed as not 'feminine' enough for media attention (Bell, 1996). Whereas Flemming, who is athletically less successful, but has long blonde hair and other normative feminine signifiers, has more media sway than Costian. It is Flemming's ideal of what 'feminine' *should* be that gains attention and publicity through the calendar.

The Atlanta Dream

To highlight the selective framing of a feminine ideal in the *GG* calendar and provide alternative readings of the female athletes, we will analyse an image from *The Atlanta Dream: A Special Issue of black + white: A Photographic Tribute* (hereafter referred to as *AD*). Obviously, *black + white* caters to a different market than the *GG* calendar: it comes in a heavy coffee-table type format and consists of 'art' photographs taken by professional photographers; its striking graphics and layout — interspersed with black and white photographs and written text – are designed for an upmarket audience. The special issue on the Atlanta Olympic Games was devoted to nude images of 16 men and 15 women who were Australian Olympic athletes. The images were selected from portrait photographers who work for the magazine.

Reading *The Atlanta Dream*

As with the *GG* calendar, specific body types were excluded from the *AD*. The lean, taut body is the commodity and is subsequently considered to be physical 'perfection'. However, by including both male and female athletes in similar poses signifying strength and activity, *AD* broadens the terms in which men and women athletes can be viewed. It is important to note that the publication acknowledges the achievements of women in sport, mentioning that although 'women have comprised less than 20% of all Australian Olympians, they have won some 40% of our gold medals' (*Atlanta Dream*, 1996: 8).

In the analysis of *AD*, the image of sprinter Lee Naylor has been chosen for a close reading. This is indicative, both through image and text, of many of the other photographs of female athletes in *AD*. The photographs of Naylor, a 400-metre runner, are spread over six pages with a short interview informing us of her

athletic career, her thoughts on her body, and noting other achievements, such as her PhD studies in neurochemistry. The interview gives meaning to both her individuality and her athletic ability. She becomes a complex person, instead of a voiceless glamorous model, and the subsequent photographs serve to complete this framework. The photographs, which focus on movement and muscularity, are blue-toned, using a photographic process that outlines and emphasizes the shape of her body. In one image showing the upper quarter of her body — her face, breast and arm — she looks at her flexed muscular arm. Her face is not highlighted, and features such as lips, eyes and hair are subdued, so the entire focus of the image is on the arm and her breast. The breast as cultural signifier of 'woman', combined with the strength of the pose and the highly defined muscular arm, suggests female strength and a woman who is active and powerful.

On the opposite pages are two posed shots, one of Naylor touching her toes, with attention again on her muscular definition through the lighting of the photograph. This photograph, and the second shot on the same page with her back to the camera and hands behind her head defining the muscles of her upper back, are similar in pose to representations of the male athletes in *AD*. These images contain little coding to suggest stereotyped norms of femininity. The entire focus is on body definition. Even though these studio photographs have a posed subject, the images connote strength and activity. It is a striking difference to the *GG* calendar, which emphasizes 'glamour' using codes of long hair, pouting lips and sexualized pose. In Naylor's photographs, when breasts are shown, as in the previous shot discussed and two full pages of her posed 'running', her muscularity and her poses accentuate what she 'does' (athletics) rather than how she looks. For example, there is an image of her exploding out of the starting blocks in a race, completely naked, her mouth wide open in a yell, and her body at full extension. This is a compelling image, connoting strength, which transfers meaning to the idea of Naylor, a female athlete, being both powerful and autonomous, as well as in control of her body and her representations. Unlike the *GG* calendar, there is no need here for a smaller photo showing Naylor in action in her chosen sport as these studio photographs give meaning to her as a powerful female athlete.

Unlike the *GG* calendar, there tends to be little disruption between women as 'feminine' and women as athletes in *AD*. What they 'do' is represented as what they 'are'. There is no smaller photograph in the corner showing what the athlete actually does in her chosen sport, and there is a distinct absence of glamorous and feminine cultural signifiers, such as cosmetics, fashion and long hair. The focus of the photographs is on the athlete's movement, strength and agility. Even when cosmetics are used it is for a stylized effect and not necessarily to 'glamorize' the athletes. Not all of the images in *AD* are overly positive in their depictions of active femininity. There are, in fact, a few images in *AD* like those in the *GG* calendar, but the majority present strong female athletes in similar poses and photo spreads to the represented male athletes. In *AD*, the female athlete's pubic hair is regularly on display and there is no attempt to hide it with hands or props, although there are no poses explicitly displaying the vagina. However, the men hide their genitals in all frontal shots with props such as basketballs, hands and

even a fish, except for one image of runner Dean Capobianco that shows his pubic hair. Pornography is one of the few visual discourses where male genitals are viewed, and by hiding, or excluding the penis from view, *AD* attempts to position itself as nude 'art' photography, rather than pornography.

Another important feature of *AD* and one that provides further distinction from the *GG* calendar, is that it gives female and male athletes a 'voice'. As hockey player Nova Peris comments, the photographer 'respected my views as a mother and a role model and went along with my ideas as to how I wanted to be portrayed' (*Atlanta Dream*, 1996: 69). Comparatively, Jane Flemming is the principal spokesperson for the *GG* calendar in the media and on the back of the calendar, thanking the 'girls' for their contribution and stating that 'they look fabulous and make fantastic models', effectively silencing them even though they were willing agents in the production of the calendar.

The emphasis in *AD* is *entirely different* from that in the *GG* calendar: the athletes' bodies are used to focus on their particular sports. Strength and muscularity are emphasized in both males and females, with the active, agile body privileged over the passive and glamorized one, even if *AD* does, like the calendar, privilege a specific segment of the female population and a particular female body type over the larger, muscular athlete. Athletes like Daniela Costian are still excluded. Although *AD* represents women as strong athletes, it does not mean they are not guilty of selective cultural 'editing' in the choice of their subjects. They *do*, however, provide alternatives to the glamorous, highly stylized femininity on display in the *GG* calendar.

AD does not display the discontinuity and textual disruption appearing in the *GG* calendar between the women's athletic performance and their performance of gender. Instead, *AD* provides a more contrasting and shifting representation of gender identities. The *GG* calendar silences these voices by reproducing and perpetuating a cultural normative of stereotyped femininity through the use of strategically placed small action shots, which separate female athletes from a perceived ideal 'femininity'. In contrast to the *GG* calendar, *AD* attempts to construct representations where women are seen as having a fluid gender identity. Women are perceived as not just sexual, non-sexual, mother, role model, strong, insecure, in control or fearful, but as all of these, providing a resistance to the normative feminine ideals, and especially to the frames of femininity represented in the *GG* calendar.

Conclusion

The *GG* calendar and *AD* focus on Australian athletes in different and often contentious ways. The way women are depicted in these publications varies, as masculinity and femininity are represented in different ways depending on the publication's intentions. The female body type located in the *GG* calendar is a marketable commodity, as is the body represented in *AD*. However, the *GG* calendar replicates the boundaries of the culturally normative female body — a body that is the opposite of the male body and has none of the normative characteristics associated with masculinity such as strength, toughness, and

power. The calendar actively seeks to prove that female athletes are not 'masculine', and the images are evidence that they have maintained an idealized notion of what Connell (1987: 183–4) terms 'emphasized femininity'. These women are the (self-)surveyors of the maintenance and reproduction of a normative femininity (Hall, 1996; Kuhn, 1988; Schulze, 1990). Conversely, most of the photographs in *AD* represent the female athletes as 'performing sport' rather than 'performing glamour'.

Moreover, this article argues that the *GG* calendar articulates a masculine versus feminine dichotomy. Promoting such a dichotomy in this context works against sportswomen. In comparison to representations of active male athletes, the *GG* calendar portrays sporting women as the inferior 'other'. The *GG* calendar acknowledges difference between the masculine and feminine. Promoting difference can lead to arguments of essentialism, for there is no 'natural' cultural body, and the feminine in our culture is viewed as the polar opposite of the masculine, and therefore inferior (Grosz, 1994). The inferior/superior binary opposition is evident in regard to media coverage of male and female athletes. This dualism is particularly relevant in sport where the link of athletic to masculine has been established by numerous sports sociologists (Hall, 1996; McKay, 1994; Theberge, 1991), and the masculine model of sporting prowess, like many other masculine models in society, is privileged and considered superior. Sporting women, therefore, are constituted as secondary and inferior, and have a battle to be seen as anything close to the masculine model. Applying and promoting a mainstream cultural ideal of femininity and gender difference is problematic for women, as Kane and Greendorfer (1994: 29) note: 'gender *difference* is translated into gender *hierarchy*, because in existing social arrangements females are defined not only as "other than" but as "less than" their male counterparts'.

The *GG* calendar, by its very form and content, denigrates what sports women 'do'. Women are seen as passive glamorous posing models, effectively negating what they are known to be — active strong female athletes. Short-term gains in publicity for some female athletes in the *GG* calendar have long-term repercussions as they reinforce stereotypical feminine models of sport and do not in any way challenge male dominance in sport.

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