IDENTITY CRISIS: WHY DO GENERAL WOMEN’S SPORTS MAGAZINES FAIL?

By

LISA SHEAFFER

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN MASS COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2005
I would like to dedicate my thesis to my dad, who coached me as the first girl in a boy’s flag football league when I was 6 years old; to my mom, who made sure education was a top priority in my life; and to Michael, who stood by me throughout the entire thesis process and withstood my reply to “what’s your thesis about” more times then there are pages in this thesis. Thank you all.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members (Ted Spiker; Debbie Treise; and especially my committee chair, Julie Dodd). I would also like to thank each of the five editors who participated in my study, for taking time out of their busy schedules to discuss the important issue of the women’s sports magazine niche.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | iii |
| ABSTRACT | vi |
| CHAPTER | |
| 1 INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE | 5 |
| History of Women's Sports Magazines | 5 |
| General Women's Sports Magazines Published in the 1990s | 8 |
| Strategies Used to Attract Female Readers | 11 |
| Business of Magazines | 13 |
| Appropriate Women's Sports | 16 |
| Stereotypical Coverage | 18 |
| Positive Influences of Sports Media | 20 |
| Theoretical Framework | 21 |
| Research Questions | 23 |
| 3 METHODOLOGY | 24 |
| Women's Sports Magazines that Ceased Publication | 26 |
| Women's Sports Magazines Publishing in 2005 | 26 |
| Women's Specialized Sports Magazines | 27 |
| Interview Questions | 27 |
| 4 RESULTS | 29 |
| Her Sports Magazine | 29 |
| Market Niche | 30 |
| Editorial Content | 30 |
| Business Plan | 32 |
| Real Sports Magazine | 33 |
| Market Niche | 34 |
| Editorial Content | 35 |
| Business Plan | 36 |
| Women's Basketball | 37 |
IDENTITY CRISIS: WHY DO GENERAL WOMEN’S SPORTS MAGAZINES FAIL?

By

Lisa Sheaffer

August 2005

Chair: Julie E. Dodd
Major Department: Journalism and Communications

The purpose of my study was to gain a better understanding of the women’s sports-magazine niche and why it has not been a successful niche. Previous research shows that sport-related stories were in fact a major editorial component of these magazines despite media criticisms to the contrary. However, little is known about the niche.

My study used qualitative, 30-minute, in-depth interviews with five editors of women’s sports magazines. Findings suggest two major visions of the market niche: a participation/individual sport-based vision and a spectator/team sport-based vision. The editors chose service stories; profiles; a sense of authority; and simple, literal covers and titles. Pre-launch research, staff size, partnerships, ownership, advertising, and circulation were important components in the business plans of the magazines. Collectively, the editors, provided information about problems many of the magazines faced. Overall, the interviews did not outline a specific reason for failure among all of the magazines in the niche. Findings suggested similar themes and patterns among the publications in the niche, which would provide a good building block for future research.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

... It’s good news when a magazine attracts the finest group of readers anyone could dream up. Thus, it is with especially deep sadness that I tell you the bad news: this issue will be *Sports Illustrated for Women*’s last. These are tough times for a magazine, and sometimes even loyal readers aren’t enough to make the numbers add up. It’s my fierce hope that we’ll be back some day in some form. . . . —Editor Susan Casey, last issue of *Sports Illustrated for Women* Dec. 2002, p.12

*Sports Illustrated for Women* (*SI Women*) was published from 1999 to 2002. The magazine focused on female athletes and other aspects of women’s sports, such as health and training. *SI Women* ended its publication with a circulation of 400,000 (up from 300,000 in 2000). The magazine had been facing financial difficulties (Keller, 2002).

The failures of magazines such as *SI Women* are all too common in the magazine business—a business that in September 2000 produced 2,065 consumer magazines. The sports-magazine market niche falls within the category of consumer magazines, and has good representation, with 207 magazines listed as publishing within the niche in 2000 (Kobak, 2002). However, longevity in the magazine business is the real test. Only 2 in 10 magazines survive the first 4 years of publication (Daly, Henry, Ryder, 1997). For example, 72 sports magazines were listed in 1981, but only 38 of those same magazines were still publishing in 2000 (Kobak, 2002).

Despite these less-than-favorable odds, the women’s sports-magazine market seems an obvious niche to pursue because of the growth of the numbers of women who participate in sports. In 1970, only 1 in 27 girls participated in high school sports. In 2001, 1 in 3 high school girls were active in sports (Cohen, 2001). This increase was due
to Title IX Education Amendments of 1972, which acted as a catalyst for the growth of women’s sports in the United States (Cohen, 2001).

Women’s professional leagues have also emerged since the passage of Title IX. The Women’s National Basketball Association celebrated its inaugural season in 1997 (Dorson, 1997), followed by the National Women’s Football Association in 2000 (NWFA, 2003). The Women’s United Soccer Association formed shortly thereafter in 2001 (WUSA, 2004). In fact, the WNBA inaugural all-star game was so popular that it was televised in 125 countries and in 20 different languages (Cohen, 2001).

It is important to look at *SI Women* because it was one of the leading magazines covering women’s sports with the financial backing of a huge media corporation¹. In addition, it came into the market with brand recognition because of the long-standing publication of *Sports Illustrated* (*SI*). In 2004, *SI* had a circulation of approximately 3 million (Bowker, 2004). Additionally, about 23% of *SI*’s readers are female (Sports Illustrated, 2002).

However, *SI Women* was only 1 of a series of magazines focused on covering women’s sports that has failed to meet with success. *Women’s Sports and Fitness* (*WSF*) faced a similar demise in 2000, after 3 years of publication² (Keller, 2002). In May 1998, Conde Nast bought the small, privately owned magazine *Women’s Sports and Fitness*, which had been published since 1974 (Steil, 1999).

In 1998, *Real Sports* emerged as viable publication in this market niche, and was the last magazine standing after *SI Women* folded. *Real Sports* provided team sports coverage of women’s sports at the collegiate and professional levels. However,

---

¹ *Sports Illustrated for Women* was published by Time, Inc. (Keller, 2002)
² *Women’s sports and Fitness* was last published by Conde Nast (Steil, 1999).
providing coverage of women’s sports (specifically at the professional level) proved challenging because of the demise of several professional women’s sports leagues. As a result, Real Sports now publishes as an e-Zine, except for an annual “Most Important Moments and Best Athletes” issue. Real Sports published in a printed format for 5 years and has continued to publish online for the past 2 years as “the authority in women’s sports” with a readership of 100,000 (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

Women’s sports magazines that focus on a specific sport (such as basketball or golf) are also important components of the women’s sports-magazine niche. Women’s Basketball and Golf for Women are among these publications.

Women’s Basketball is a moneymaking magazine launched in 1999\(^3\) (Keller, 2002). Women’s Basketball covers the latest news about high school, college, and professional basketball (Oxbridge Communication, Inc., 2004). As of 2004, Women’s Basketball claimed a circulation of 13,562 (Oxbridge Communication, Inc., 2004).

Golf for Women launched in 1988\(^4\). Golf for Women sought to reach women who wanted to learn more about golf and improve their golf skills; and who were interested in the latest equipment and golf fashion. Golf for Women continues to publish bimonthly and is credited with a circulation of 484,994, comparable to that of SI Women and the other general women’s sports magazines (Oxbridge Communication, Inc., 2004).

New general women’s sports magazines continue to enter the market despite past failures. Her Sports, a general women’s sports magazine, published its first issue in March 2004. It focused on covering women’s sports, nutrition, and athletic wear and

\(^3\) Women’s Basketball was originally launched by Ashton International Media, Inc.; as of 2005, the magazine was published by Mandavor Media, Inc. (Oxbridge Communication, Inc., 2004)

\(^4\) Golf for Women is published by the Golf Digest Company (Oxbridge Communication, Inc., 2004).
equipment. *Her Sports* has a circulation of 50,000 (Oxbridge Communication, Inc., 2004).

*SI Women, WSF, and Real Sports* had difficulties finding a market for general women’s sports. In fact, 2 of the top circulating magazines, *WSF* and *SI Women*, had to undergo identity shifts in an attempt to attract more readers; and perhaps this identity crisis led readers astray. For instance, when *WSF* was bought by Conde Nast, fitness rapidly became an editorial priority. This change was reflected in the logotype change on the cover that made fitness equal in size to sports (Barrios, personal communication, March 2, 2005). *SI Women* also saw a major editorial shift when Susan Casey became the new managing editor after the magazine had been publishing for 2 years. Casey redesigned the magazine and changed editorial sections throughout the publication (Casey, personal communication, March 5, 2005).

Originally, the failure of *SI Women* and *WSF* was said to be the result of a lack of sport-related stories in these magazines; however, a content analysis study analyzed the articles from *SI Women* and concluded that sports issues were in fact a major focus of the magazine (Fink, 2002).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Women’s Sports Magazines

Among the first women’s sports magazines was *The Sportswoman* started in 1924. It was published by the United States Field Hockey Association until it ceased publication in 1936. It often reported results of different types of athletic competitions and profiles of athletes (Creedon, 1994).

*The Women Bowler*, published by the Women’s International Bowling Congress (WIBC), was the next women’s sports publication to emerge; making its first appearance on newsstands in May 1936. At first the magazine was association-oriented in that it covered changes in the WIBC’s regulations or other news relating to the organization; however, in the 1990s, the publication changed its name to *WB* and broadened its coverage to include information outside of the league resulting in an increased circulation from 175,000 to 500,000. Additionally, the magazine was redesigned to achieve a more modern look (Folio, 1994). This magazine was one of the few women’s sports magazines with longevity and published well in the mid 1990s; however, as of 2005 it is no longer publishing (Creedon, 1994).

Despite the emergence of these early women’s sports magazines, there was a gap in the publication of additional women’s sports magazines from the late 1930s until the 1970s. The 1970s would bring a new surge of interest to women’s sports from a media perspective as a result of major legislation—Title IX (Creedon, 1994).
Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was passed by the United States Congress and is attributed with the unprecedented growth of women’s sports in the United States, which also promoted a new wave in women’s sports magazines. Title IX banned discrimination against girls and women in school athletic programs (Cohen, 2001). It stated: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. . . .” (Title IX Education Amendments of 1972, Section 1681). While Title IX was certainly not the beginning of women’s sports in the United States, it did lead to the growth in the participation of women in sports programs. In 1970, 1 of every 27 girls participated in high school sports. As of 2001, one in three high school girls were active in sports (Cohen, 2001).

Women’s athletics at the college level also increased. Since 1972, participation at this level has increased by 400%. An average of 150.1 women participated at the college level per institution as of 2002, up from 98.7 in 1981 (NCAA, 2003).

As a result of the interest in women’s sports created by Title IX, the mainstream women’s publications such as Seventeen, Glamour, Redbook and the Ladies’ Home Journal began including sport and health information in their publications, paving the way for the emergence of additional women’s sports magazines in the 1970s (Creedon, 1994).

The Lady Golfer was one of these publications and was published by Dorothy Reese. Another publication was Sportswoman. This publication appeared quarterly and reported on local and regional sporting events at all levels. Oftentimes, sports coverage
in *Sportswoman* was tied to a political issue such as Title IX. Then in 1975, due to financial difficulties, the magazine suspended publication for a short time and then for good in 1977. The financial difficulties of *Sportswoman* were no doubt a result of the emergence of a competitor magazine *WomenSports*. *WomenSports* began publication in 1974 under tennis icon Billie Jean King and would eventually become *Women’s Sports and Fitness*. *Women’s Sports and Fitness* originally published under the umbrella of a small company with a minimal budget until it was bought by Conde Nast in May 1998. Additionally, several sports organizations began publishing their own women’s sports magazines such as the Field Hockey Organization with *The Eagle* and The Lacrosse Organization with *Crosse Checks* (Creedon, 1994).

However, the niche of women’s sports magazines grew even more rapidly in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Women’s sports magazines that focused on a particular sport were one group of magazines that emerged at this time. *Golf for Women* launched in 1988 and was published by the Golf Digest Company. *Golf for Women* sought to reach women who wanted to learn more about golf, improve their golf skills, and who were interested in the latest equipment and golf fashion. *Golf for Women* continues to publish bimonthly and is credited with a circulation of 484,994; however, it is a small entity compared to its male counterpart *Golf* magazine, which focuses on golf instruction, player profiles, golf-related travel, and golf equipment and has a circulation of 1,410,783. *Women’s Basketball* was another one of these single-sport magazines and first hit newsstands in 1999 approximately a decade after *Golf for Women*. Backed by Mandavor Media, it sought to cover the latest news about high school, college, and

---

1 There is little documented information on these older women’s sports publications.
professional basketball. As of 2004, *Women’s Basketball* claims a circulation of 13,562. Again, the male version of *Women’s Basketball, Basketball Digest*, is much larger with a circulation of 106,792 and covers professional and college basketball (Oxbridge Communication, 2004).

**General Women’s Sports Magazines Published in 1990s**

General women’s sports magazines also emerged during the late 1990s, and these general women’s sports titles will be the focus of this study. During this time women’s professional leagues began to emerge as a result of the surge of interest in women’s sports created by the 1996 Olympics where 3,779 female athletes participated, accounting for 37% of all the athletes at the games, more than ever before. Additionally, it was the largest percent increase in women’s participation in the Olympic Games within a 4-year span (Coffey, 1996). The Women’s National Basketball Association celebrated its inaugural season in 1997 (Dorson, 1997), followed by the National Women’s Football Association in 2000 (NWFA, 2003). The Women’s United Soccer Association formed shortly thereafter in 2001 (WUSA, 2004).

*Women’s Sports and Fitness* was the first of these general women’s sports publications in the market niche at the time. *Real Sports* was the next magazine to emerge, first published in November 1998 (personal communication, February 26, 2005). This publication was not backed by a major publishing company but would be the last magazine in the market niche. Finally, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, backed by Time, Inc., published its first issue in the spring of 1999 (Keller, 2002).

The general women’s sports publications of the 1990s originally were unable to attract the readership that pre-launch research had promised, so changes were made.
Women’s Sports and Fitness under Conde Nast saw an increased focus on fitness and less of a focus on sports. The word “sports” on the cover was originally much larger than the word “fitness” in the logotype, but they were changed under Conde Nast to appear equal in size, and the change wasn’t simply visual. An editorial and design shift was made so the magazine would draw the large audiences that read Shape and Fitness magazines. In fact, the magazine’s newsstand positioning was changed so that it would no longer appear with the other sports publications but with fitness magazines Self and Shape (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

Sports Illustrated for Women saw shifts of its own when a new editor, Susan Casey, came on board in the fall of 1999. Susan Casey gave the magazine a graphic redesign and section overhaul (Media Week, 2002).

However, editorial shifts in an effort to find an audience wasn’t enough to keep the magazines afloat. By 2000 Women’s Sports and Fitness stopped publishing. Then in 2002 Sports Illustrated for Women ceased publication in December (Keller, 2002). Real Sports also had to cut their print edition and opted for an electronic, e-zine format (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

While these publications ceased, they had an audience, which can be seen through their circulation numbers. Sports Illustrated for Women ceased publication with a circulation of 400,000 (Keller, 2002). While it was the largest of the publications, even the smallest publication, Real Sports, had a circulation of 100,000 (personal communication, February 26, 2005). In any case, there is clearly an interest in women’s sports and a market for it. Further, research from Real Sports (2003) shows that men are
also interested in female athletes and athletics. *Real Sports* had a male readership of 30% (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

What caused these general women’s sports magazines to cease publication? Media criticism originally focused on the idea that the magazines didn’t cover women’s sports as much as they covered fitness information; however, researchers have examined this criticism in *SI Women* and found it to be incorrect.

Research published in 2002 compared the content of *SI Women* and the content of *SI*. Through content analysis, the researcher analyzed 1,105 articles and 1,745 photographs in these publications between 1997 and 1999. In *SI Women*, 80% of the stories coded were sport-related and 12% of the stories focused on personal fitness. Further, 42.5% of all the articles coded in both publications were sports-related (Fink, 2002).

Yet another criticism that emerged after the failure of these magazines was that each magazine failed to establish an identity. The magazines saw cover changes and editorial changes, which may have prevented them from establishing a loyal readership.

However, despite past failures, publishers are not ready to give up. *Dandelion* magazine launched in 2003 (Oxbridge Communication, 2004). The editorial content is tailored to women who enjoy “outdoor experiences” (Oxbridge Communication, 2004). Its circulation is 115,000 (Folio, 2005). Editor Michelle Theall decided to launch the magazine after reading statistics from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, which found that 80% of all sports apparel was purchased by women (Folio, 2005). As a result, Theall uses this information to sell the magazine to advertisers and also uses
retailer outlets, specifically outdoor retailers, as distribution sites for the magazine, which makeup approximately 25% of single-copy sales (Folio, 2005).

Meanwhile, *Her Sports*, another magazine focusing on women’s sports, published its first issue in 2004. Publisher Dawna Stone conducted focus groups on the East and West coasts based on a prototype she had developed. Her research revealed that readers and advertisers preferred to take part in a publication that discussed sports as a hobby instead of focusing on professional female athletes. Stone discovered readers could relate better to the publication on this hobby level (Husni, 2004). Whether this research will result in the longevity of *Her Sports* remains to be seen.

**Strategies Used to Attract Female Readers**

Women account for only about 25% of sport-viewers. Researchers analyzed sport-viewers of ESPN and found that there are three male viewers for every female viewer (Tierney, 2003). In fact, men are not only more likely to view sports, they are also more likely than women to view women’s sports (Tierney, 2003). Men account for more than half of the viewing audience for women’s soccer and women’s college basketball (Tierney, 2003). As a result, other media should be looked at through which to reach women interested in sports. Magazines will be looked at as a potential medium through which these women can be reached as well as techniques typically used to attract female audiences in the magazine business.

Female readers tend to be more interested in feature-style formats. Women like to feel connected to their sources and want to relate to them, which features allow.

---

2 Feature stories allow writers to tell a story in an in-depth, detail-oriented way, which enables readers to get to know and relate to the sources in the story.
Additionally, point of view, especially if first or second person is used, can make the story more relatable to women (Gough-Yates, 2003).

Women also want to read a variety of different stories, such as stories about family, work and friends, dealing with all facets of life. This can be seen in their dissatisfaction with being viewed through only one lens; therefore, publishers are steering clear of defining women in one role. In today’s market women want to be seen in relation to their many daily responsibilities (Tsui, 2000).

Women’s magazine editors have also recently increased their focus on celebrities. Sometimes these celebrities are even used as guest editors. Editors often choose celebrities who embody the values and attitudes of their publication. For example, a publication such as *Sports Illustrated* might ask Tiger Woods to write a column on the importance of preparing mentally for a major athletic competition. This is a “sure-fire” way to improve magazine sales (Gough-Yates, 2003).

Finally, the applicability of the stories or issues discussed in the magazine are important. Many magazine marketers are finding that women are looking for streamlined ideas and products that help simplify their lives. They are seeking particular information that they can apply to their lives through service or how-to stories (Tsui, 2000). The applicability focus can be seen through interest in women’s magazines such as *Martha Stuart Living* and *Real Simple* magazine.

If sports magazines used these techniques, perhaps they would draw a larger female audience; however, research has not been conducted to see if these techniques were used in general women’s sports magazines such as *SI Women* or *Women’s Sports and Fitness*. 
Business of Magazines

Defunct magazines *SI Women* and *Women’s Sports and Fitness* are actually in the majority as 60% of new magazines fail within the first year of publication (Husni, 2004). Further, only 2 in 10 magazines survive the first four years of publication (Daly, Henry, Ryder, 1997). The sports niche in magazine publishing seems to be especially difficult because in addition to the failure of several women’s sports magazines, general sports magazines *Sporting News* and *Inside Sports* have also failed in the sports niche (Kobak, 2002). Even *Sports Illustrated* had trouble becoming a profitable magazine. It took 10 years and $40 million in losses before *SI* became a successful publication (MacCambridge, 1997). As a result, it is easy to see why establishing a magazine is a complicated business that requires a solid plan and a media corporation that can absorb years of financial losses (Daly et al. 1997).

The three major components of the magazine—editorial content, advertising, and an audience—are imperative to the publication. Each component works together toward the success of the magazine. For example, excellent editorial content draws an audience to the publication, and an audience entices advertisers to advertise in the magazine and so forth. As a result, each aspect must be carefully taken into consideration during the development of the launch (Daly et al. 1997).

Kobak (2002) outlined 6 steps in the launch of a new magazine: the establishment of editorial, the assembly of a business plan, the development of a pilot issue, research, the compilation of staff, and the actual publishing of the magazine (Kobak, 2002). The launch process will be outlined for a better understanding of the
women’s sports-magazine market as *SI Women, Her Sports*, and *Real Sports* were all newly launched in the 1990s.

The development of the editorial content and focus of a magazine usually start with a 10-word mission statement of the publication such as *Self* magazine’s mission statement: “The self-improvement magazine for today’s complete woman.” However, the development of the editorial mission is always centered around the interests of the potential audience (Kobak, 2002). *USA Today* provides a good example of this because researchers at the publication found that in a weekday 850,000 people traveled by air, 1.75 million people stayed in hotels and motels, and 100 million people moved within the past 10 years. This would be the *USA Today’s* prime audience—mobile Americans looking for news from home. As a result, it was easy for the newspaper to crystallize their editorial mission of providing domestic news to mobile Americans (Prichard, 1987). Editors essentially anticipate the needs and wants of readers during the launch process in order to develop their publication, and this is why the uses and gratifications theory is important to the research study.

The business plan is also a major step in the launch of a magazine. It is imperative because it will help the launch and publication process go smoothly as well as help recruit investors and employees. The business plan usually includes a mission of the magazine, ideas for the editorial content, the audience being targeted, a listing of potential advertisers, the competition both in the magazine market and in other media outlets, a plan for staff assembly, any extension ideas for the brand, and a financial plan (Kobak, 2002).
A pilot issue of the magazine also should be created, which can be shown to potential investors, employees, and suppliers so that they can understand the vision of the magazine. The pilot issue typically looks exactly like the actual publication will once it is published. Most pilots are usually about 40 pages long of which 24 pages are filled with editorial content and 16 are filled with mock advertising (Kobak, 2002). Dawna Stone of Her Sports used her pilot issue as the discussion point in focus groups where she received feedback from potential readers about the content and design of the magazine before the launch (Husni, 2004).

As seen by Stone’s use of the pilot issue, research is also vital in the launch of a new magazine. The research team at USA Today conducted 2,000 personal interviews in 24 of the largest markets, which helped mold the editorial mission of the publication (Prichard, 1987). Direct mailings to potential readers as well as focus groups are also common ways to gage the public’s interest in the magazine (Kobak, 2002). A 3-5% response rate to direct mailings usually shows the magazine has promise (Daly et al. 1997). Additionally, some magazines also conduct in-depth interviews with potential advertisers to see how marketable their idea is in the advertising realm (Kobak, 2002).

Staff recruitment for a new magazine is also an important step that must be taken before publishing. Typically, a monthly special-interest consumer magazine has between 20 and 30 people on staff in editorial, graphics, advertising, and circulation. Additionally, magazines often rely a great deal on freelancers (Kobak, 2002). Major publishing companies that publish multiple publications have an edge against smaller companies when launching a new magazine because the company can offer some relief when it comes to personnel. For example, USA Today used “loaners” from other Ganette
papers to assemble their staff. As a result, it minimized staff expense for the company (Prichard, 1987).

The actual publication of the magazine is the final step in the process during which the magazine is created and assembled each month. Usually a magazine will publish reporting losses for the first 5 years (Kobak, 2002).

**Appropriate Women’s Sports**

Despite the growth of women’s participation in sports and women’s sports leagues since the passage of Title IX in 1972, the media has yet to afford proportionate coverage to female athletes and sporting events (Adams & Tuggle, 2003; Gniazdowski & Denham, 2003; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Weiller & Higgs, 1999).

A study conducted by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles in 2000 found televised coverage of women’s sports in the area made up only 8.7% of sports coverage. In addition, women’s sports programming composed less than 15% of all sport media coverage, including television, radio, newspapers and magazines (Cohen, 2001).

Coverage of female athletes has not improved in the last 7 years. In one study, Adams and Tuggle (2003) analyzed the coverage of ESPN’s Sports Center in 2002 and compared the results to those of a study that analyzed the same program in 1995. In 1995 the coverage of male to female athletes was 25 stories to 1 story; in 2002 that ratio was more than 48 stories to 1 story. In addition, stories about male athletes received more time, and the ratio of 1.71 seconds for men to 1 second for women remained constant through the years (Adams & Tuggle, 2003).

Specialty magazines are another important area of sports coverage. Two of the major sports magazines include *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN*, which combined have a
circulation of more than 4 million (Bowker, 2004). However, these magazines tailor their coverage to male readers, and the majority of the coverage found in these publications focuses on male athletes (Salwen & Wood, 1994; Gniazdowski & Denham, 2003).

Salwen and Wood (1994) coded the covers of *Sports Illustrated* from 1957-1959, 1967-1969, 1977-1979 and 1987-1989. After analyzing 837 individuals on the 504 covers, the researchers found that female athletes accounted for only 4.4% of the individuals on the cover (55 female athletes compared to the 782 male athletes). In addition, of the female athletes depicted on the cover, only 2.2% of them were shown in active poses, compared to the 97.8% of male athletes shown in active poses. The researchers concluded that the coverage of female athletes in *Sports Illustrated* has not improved. In fact, the greatest number of female athletes appeared on the cover of the magazine in the 1950s, when they accounted for 14.3% of the athletes featured on the cover, compared to the 1980s, during which they only accounted for 6.6% of the athletes on the cover of the publication (Salwen & Wood, 1994).

Gniazdowski and Denham (2003) examined photographs of female athletes in *Sports Illustrated*. A total of 631 photographs were coded based on what the athletes were wearing, their positioning, and their placement in the picture. The swimsuit issue was not included in the analysis due to the fact that it is a special issue and not typical of the magazine’s coverage. Photographs in *Sports Illustrated* depicted men in 94.2% of the photographs, and women were depicted in 5.4% of the photographs (Gniazdowski & Denham, 2003).

*ESPN* magazine doesn’t even aspire to attract female readers. The magazine’s website mission statement reflects the idea that it is a publication that tailors its editorial
content for the “young, affluent, male avid sports fan.” Its circulation statistics report a
94% male readership (ESPN, 2002).

Television coverage of major sporting events is yet another area of concern in the
coverage of female athletics. Researchers analyzed 2 professional women’s golf
tournaments and compared them to 2 professional men’s golf tournaments. The viewing
times varied greatly between the men’s and women’s tournaments. The men’s
tournaments accounted for 17.5 hours compared with 9 hours of women’s golf (Weiller
& Higgs, 1999).

**Stereotypical Coverage**

Female athletes typically had been portrayed as graceful and feminine, and trying
to get media attention in a sport that isn’t synonymous with traditional women’s sports,
such as figure skating or gymnastics, has proven difficult (Cohen, 2001).

As a result, when female athletes are covered in the media, the coverage tends to
be stereotypical in several ways. First of all, the coverage often depicts women in non-
active poses, trivializing their athletic accomplishments, and instead focusing on their
appearance (Incantalupo, 1992). Second, female athletes who take part in non-traditional
women’s sports, such as basketball and softball, are often ignored by the media (Vincent
et al. 2002). Third, coverage is often marked by sexual description in stories (Vincent et
al. 2002).

Female athletes tend to be depicted in non-active poses, and this stereotypical
coverage was evident in a study in which researchers analyzed sport-based
advertisements with photographs in *Shape* in 1985 and 1990. In 1985, the sport-based
advertisements with photographs in *Shape* depicted female athletes in non-active poses in
69.5% of the coverage. This stereotypical presentation of women athletes seemed to
improve and in 1990, 48.46% of the advertisements featuring women in Shape focusing on athletes in non-active poses (Incantalupo, 1992).

Hardin, Lynn, Walsdork, and Hardin (2002) analyzed editorial photographs in SI Kids magazine. The researchers used content analysis to determine if there had been any shift in the coverage of female athletes after the 1996 Olympics. The researchers analyzed photographs from a three-year period from July 1996 to June 1999. The analysis concluded that the editorial photographs, pictures excluding those relating to advertisements, continued to portray women in stereotypical and sexual ways. Men were depicted in 76.3% of the editorial photographs, which suggested male athletes were depicted 3 times more than female athletes. Further, 58% of the photographs depicted men in active poses, while only 15.1% of the photographs depicted women in active poses. The ratio of active women to active men was 1 to 4. Finally, female athletes were rarely shown in leadership roles as owners, officials, or coaches, appearing in only 3% of the 6,000 depictions as leaders, compared to men who were depicted in 97% of the leadership depictions (Hardin et al. 2002).

Nelson (2000) examined the adjectives used when describing male and female athletes; 14 adjectives were commonly used to describe the appearance of female athletes, compared to 2 used to describe the appearance of male athletes in print media (Nelson, 2000).

A study conducted by Vincent (2002) exemplifies the dominant coverage of female athletes in traditional women’s sports. The researcher analyzed text and photographs in newspapers in Canada, the United States and Great Britain during the 1996 Olympic Games from July 19, 1996, to August 5, 1996. The findings indicated that
63.7% of the articles that focused on female athletes covered athletes who took part in traditional women’s sports (gymnastics, swimming, diving, and tennis) and 36.3% of the articles focused on athletes in non-traditional women’s sports (soccer, softball, volleyball, and field hockey). In addition, 76% of the photographs taken of female athletes were of those involved in traditional sports (Vincent et al. 2002).

Thirdly, sexual innuendos and overtones are often seen in the coverage of female athletes, and this was clear in the textual analysis of Vincent’s (2002) study of the 1996 Olympic Games. The researcher found that women’s beach volleyball was frequently covered with sexual overtones. An example of this can be seen in an excerpt from the *Daily Mail* newspaper, where the writer referred to beach volleyball as “Baywatch with points and medals... acres of sand but many more acres of flesh” (Daily Mail, July 24, 1996, p.62).

**Positive Influences of Sports Media**

Research suggests sport-media exposure is related to body satisfaction among females (Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Bissell, 2004). Further, sport-related media may also increase confidence among girls in their athletic abilities (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Generally, the media portray women with unhealthy and unnatural bodies resulting in body dissatisfaction among women (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). As a result, should female athletes be covered and covered without stereotypical frames, they could offer a more positive image to young girls as well as to women in general.

A 2003 study conducted by Harrison and Fredrickson surveyed 374 females aged 10-19 about their body satisfaction in relation to their sport-media exposure. Approximately 61.5% of the participants read one or more sports magazine every month.
The researchers’ findings suggested that, independent of sports participation, students in grades 10-12 were less likely to experience body dissatisfaction and eating disorders if they were exposed to sports magazines. There was no significant finding in the other age groups (Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003).

In another study Bissell (2004), 324 women were interviewed from the South, the Southwest and the Northeast to determine if their body satisfaction was related to how much and how often they watched or read sports media. The researchers found that exposure to general sports media resulted in higher body satisfaction. Women who weren’t exposed to sports media were less likely to be satisfied with their bodies, and women who were exposed to more than 1.5 hours of sport media were more likely to be satisfied with their bodies (Bissell, 2004).

One study specifically focused on youth attitudes toward female athletes. Heywood & Dworkin (2003) conducted seven focus groups in three high schools and four elementary schools in the Southwestern and Western United States. The students were asked to discuss and write their opinions and feelings about female athletes. Most girls responded positively with remarks such as “I think I can be as strong as her,” “I am proud of being a girl,” and “It is good because she is working out like men and a lot of people think we can’t work out” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is built around the uses and gratifications theory. This theory assumes receivers of media messages are active audiences who seek out certain media to fit their wants, needs, functions, and uses (Rubin, 1994). This theory is important to the study because editors had to anticipate the needs and wants of their
readers in order to formulate their magazines. As a result, understanding the needs and wants of readers is vital to the success of the magazine.

The uses and gratifications theory was first developed in 1940 in an effort to determine why audiences chose certain media (Ruggiero, 2000). The theory evaluated how individuals used the media to meet their needs, to understand the motives for media behavior, and to identify function or consequences that follow from needs, motives, and behavior (Rubin, 1994).

Initial research attempted to uncover motives and selection patterns of audience members (Ruggiero, 2000). Early studies examined radio audiences, quiz program audiences, daytime serial gratifications, serious music audience motives, child interests in comics, functions of newspaper reading, and media genres (Ruggiero, 2000). The uses and gratifications theory is also used to analyze not only content, but also the particular medium. So, uses and gratifications can be examined from a content or medium perspective (Ruggiero, 2000).

The medium evaluated in this study is magazines; however, there has been little research focusing on uses and gratifications and monthly magazines. The research that has been done in this area focuses on general use of magazines, comparing the uses and gratifications of readers of consumer magazines and news magazines or consumer magazines and trade magazines (Quint, 2004). More recently research has focused on the uses and gratifications of a specific magazine audience (Quint, 2004). For example, research has analyzed the needs and wants of a certain racial or social group who reads a particular magazine. As a result of this research, despite being scarce, three uses of magazines have been identified: surveillance, interaction, and diversion (Quint, 2004).
The uses and gratifications theory has been able to continually develop. The theory has shifted since its inception and now focuses on individual use and choice. However, it is important to note that while the unit of analysis is the individual, the analysis has moved away from the micro view to larger more macro view. So instead of looking at the theory as sender to receiver, it is now looked at as media to audience (Ruggiero, 2000).

The uses and gratifications theory was used in this study because female readers of magazines are using the medium for a certain purpose or to fulfill certain needs. This study examines what editors at women’s sports magazines perceived to be the needs and wants of their readers and how they formulated their editorial content and business plan in conjunction with these needs and wants.

**Research Questions**

- **Research question 1**: How did editors define the market niche of women’s sports magazines?

- **Research question 2**: What kind of editorial content was used in the publication and why?

- **Research question 3**: What was the magazine’s business plan?
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher needed to determine the planning and rationale of each magazine’s major departments. Thirty-minute, in-depth interviews were conducted to enable the researcher to gain insight into the visions and goals of 5 of the editors of women’s sports magazines. Conducting in-depth interviews is an ideal way to uncover the logic and rationale behind decisions and beliefs. Such interviews allow the researcher to obtain a deep understanding of the subject’s world and thought process, which is necessary in this research study because it aims to understand the visions and perceptions of the editors in relation to their publications (McCracken, 1988).

This is a qualitative approach that allowed respondents to give more detailed answers due to the real-time phone interviews. It also gave the researcher a look into the interviewees experiences, opinions, and values. As a result, this method resulted in more accurate responses and a deeper understanding of how the respondent arrived at their conclusions (Wimmer & Domminick, 2003).

Two magazines were chosen from three different categories of women’s sports magazines—magazines that have failed, magazines that are currently publishing, and magazines that focus on a specific sport instead of on sports in general. The magazines were placed in these categories because similarities or patterns within these groupings would seem likely to emerge in the conclusions. All of the magazines chosen for the study focused specifically on women’s sports and were published nationally at some
point between 1996 and 2005. The 1996 Olympics caused a surge in the public’s interest in women’s sports. Major professional women’s sports leagues emerged shortly after the 1996 Olympics, and, as a result, this study used the 1996 Olympics as the marker for the beginning of the most recent wave in women’s sports (Coffey, 1996).

The researcher attempted to interview an editor from each of the following: SI Women, Women’s Sports and Fitness, Real Sports, Her Sports, Women’s Basketball, and Women’s Golf.

A letter was first sent to each of the editors the researcher sought to interview by email (See Appendix A). The letter gave each editor a brief description of the study and an idea of questions that they would be asked. It also notified them that the researcher would be contacting them by telephone within the next couple of days in regard to the study.

Editors were then contacted by telephone in order to set up an interview time. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was tape-recorded and transcribed. Prior to the interview each editor was emailed or mailed their Institutional Review Board consent form (See Appendix B for IRB forms). The interviews were conducted during February 2005 and March 2005.

However, the study is based on information from only 5 of the 6 publications due to the fact that Susan Reed, the editor of Women’s Golf, declined to take part in the research study. The researcher received no response from the initial email and phone call, so additional phone calls were made on at least five other occasions and followed-up on with emails. Finally, the researcher was notified that Reed was too busy to participate in the study.
**Women’s Sports Magazines that Ceased Publication**

*SI Women* was published nationally by Time, Inc. from 1999-2002. The publication ceased with a circulation of 400,000. *SI Women* focused on sports, health, fitness, and information for active women. Former editor of *SI Women*, Susan Casey, worked as the managing editor of the publication from 2001 to 2002 (Bacon’s Information, Inc., 2002).

*Women’s Sports and Fitness* was published nationally by Women’s Sports and Fitness, Inc. from 1974-1998. The publication has a circulation of approximately 300,000. *Women’s Sports and Fitness* focused on women who participate in individual sports such as running and biking. Former editor of *WSF*, Dagny Scott Barrios, worked as the editor-in-chief of the publication from 1996 to 1998 and was interviewed (Katz & Sternberg Katz, 1992).

**Women’s Sports Magazines Publishing in 2005**

*Her Sports* is published nationally by Wet Dog Media and was launched in 2004. As of 2005, the publication has a circulation of 50,000. *Her Sports* focuses on sport-related activities. Founder and publisher, Dawna Stone, was interviewed (Oxbridge Communication, Inc, 2004).

*Real Sports* is published nationally by ADL, Inc. and was launched in 1998. As of 2005, the publication has a circulation of 150,000. *Real Sports* covers women’s sports at all levels of play. Co-founder and publisher, Amy Love, was interviewed (Oxbridge Communication, Inc, 2004).
Women’s Specialized Sports Magazines

*Women’s Basketball* is published nationally by Madavor Media and was launched in 1999. As of 2005, the publication has a circulation of 13,562. *Women’s Basketball* covers basketball for women at the high school, college, and professional level. Co-founder and former editor, Lois Elfman, worked as the editor of the magazine until 2004 and was interviewed (Oxbridge Communication, Inc, 2004).

*Women’s Golf* is published nationally by the Golf Digest Company and was launched in 1988. As of 2005, the publication has a circulation of 484,994. Women’s Golf helps women learn more about the game of golf, improve their skills, and gain knowledge of the latest golf equipment. Susan Reed is the editor of this publication and was unavailable for an interview (Oxbridge Communication, Inc., 2004).

**Interview Questions**

Editors of each of the 5 publications were asked general questions and then further prompted with follow-up topics during the interview. The interview centered around 3 major areas, which coincide with the research questions: defining the market niche, editorial content, and the business plan (refer to appendix C for the interview guide).

The researcher had difficulty getting in-depth information from the editors about the business plan due to the 30-minute time limitation, which is not a great deal of time for a discussion about a major topic such as an entire magazine niche. As a result, follow-up questions were emailed to the editors in an effort to elicit more comprehensive information about the business plan of each publication.
Each magazine is introduced in Chapter 4 with basic background information about the publication and editor; however, that information is not consistent from publication to publication, but the researcher reported all of the information available for each of the publications. Each interview was transcribed and further studied for themes. Themes are arranged based on patterns that emerge from the observations obtained through the interviews. Observations that were alike or those that were contradictory were noted in the themes and conclusions (McCracken, 1988).
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

The results section was derived from 30-minute phone interviews with top editors from 5 women’s sports magazines. Editors were asked broad, open-ended questions, which allowed them to give in-depth and thoughtful responses. The interviews were then analyzed by reading for themes.

Her Sports Magazine

Her Sports magazine is published bi-monthly in St. Petersburg, Florida, by Wet Dog Media at 80 pages an issue. The subscription rate is $17 a year, and the cover price is $5 an issue. Her Sports magazine has a circulation of 50,000. Sports-related activities such as running, skiing, snowboarding, and hiking are the editorial focus of the publication. The magazine was launched in 2004 and continues to publish through 2005 (Oxbridge Communications, Inc, 2004).

President and publisher of Her Sports, Dawna Stone, formally the chief marketing officer at MarineMax a major boat retailer, launched the magazine for women’s sports in 2004. Stone has a Bachelor’s degree from UC Berkley and an MBA from UCLA. Her experience includes finance and banking during which she has worked for Morgan Stanley. Additionally, Stone is an accomplished athlete. She was a competitive swimmer throughout college and participated in the Iron Man Triathlon world championship in Hawaii (UCLA, 2004).
Market niche

Stone said women in this market niche are between the ages of 25 and 49. They compete in 2 to 5 different sports. The majority classify themselves as runners, triathletes, and cyclists. However, the different readers of Her Sports are interested in and participate in about 15 different sports. These readers are also well educated—97% of the readers are college educated.

Stone said there is a market niche for women’s sports magazines, but it is not large enough to keep a major publishing company interested.

I think the large publication companies are too big to put the time and effort into the smaller niche publications and there’s a huge group of women, probably in the range of 9 million women that say they participate in an individual sport on a regular basis. So the market is out there. I would say it is somewhere between a possible 400,000 to 500,000 circulation ability to get in this target group (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

Editorial content

Stone conducted focus groups on the East and West coasts, which gave her a good sense of what readers in this market niche were interested in reading. After asking participants in the focus groups what they liked and disliked about women’s sports magazines that had failed in the past such as SI Women, she realized the readers didn’t want to read as much about professional athletes.

They didn’t want to read so much about the professional athlete but about women they could relate to and look at and say well if she can do it so can I. I think the problem out there is that unlike men, I don’t think women get as enamored by the professional athlete and don’t want to follow step by step their career or their lifestyle and instead just want to be motivated and inspired. It is hard to be motivated and inspired by an athlete whose full-time job is training and competing (personal communication, February 24, 2005).
As a result, the magazine rarely included information on or stories about professional athletes. *Her Sports* took another divergence from the editorial content in other women’s sports magazines by focusing solely on individual sports.

We don’t cover any ball sports, so we don’t cover tennis, volleyball, basketball, or soccer where in *SI Women* that was their main focus. After you graduate from high school or college it is difficult to get involved in a team sport. It is often easier instead to go run or go for a bike ride, so that is what we focus on (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

Stone also veered away from the content of the sports verticals or magazines that focus on a specific sport by focusing on the lifestyle aspect of women’s sports.

If you pick up cycling magazine, you are going to get the details about the derailer on your bike. We don’t do that. We are going to tell you where to go with your friends for a weekend ride and so I think that is why we have been so popular with the women. If they are super, super hard core they can go and pick up cycling magazine and also read *Her Sports* to find out the lifestyle focus. Most women don’t want that technical information as much as they want the fun read that can motivate and inspire them to go out and do it (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

Most of the editorial content is devoted to sports but nutrition and fitness are also 2 other major areas of editorial focus. However, when either fitness or nutrition are included they relate to how to help the readers improve in her sport.

If you get right down to it 70% of our magazine is about sports, probably 20% of our editorial is on nutrition, and 10% is on fitness. The goal behind *Her Sports* magazine was to give women a magazine that they can read and feel good about and isn’t all about weight loss (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

As far as editorial techniques were concerned, profiles were an important part of the makeup.

We do a section in the front called ‘Women Who Move,’ which is basically 5 or 6 women who do sports. We always do at least one big profile. It could be someone who just started out or someone who has been doing it for a long, long time. Our final page in the magazine is called ‘Her Story,’ which is where we just write a 1-page article with photos about a person with a pretty interesting story.
Stories we’ve done in the past include one about a 79-year-old women who just started running when she was 64 (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

The title of the magazine as well as the cover were also important decisions in the launch of *Her Sports*. Participants in the focus groups helped Stone select a title name.

We came up with a bunch of different names and took them to focus groups with us, and that’s where we got our feedback. We started out with 7 or 8 different titles for the magazine and narrowed it down to 3. *Her Sports* kept coming up as the simplest and easiest to remember (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

Guidelines for the cover stemmed from the goal of making the magazine authentic.

It was one of our main goals to be really authentic, so we wanted to portray a true athlete. We decided that from day one, individuals on our cover were going to be true athletes, doing a sport they actually do. We didn’t want them to look awkward (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

Additionally, Stone wanted to make sure the editorial mission of the magazine was clear to readers by looking at the cover.

We wanted the cover to represent what the magazine represents internally. Having a cover where they do action helps people understand as a whole what they are going to find in the magazine (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

**Business plan**

Stone began writing her business plan the night she read Susan Casey’s farewell letter in *SI Women*, and she said it is “still evolving 2 years later.”

We started doing focus groups, which then of course changed what we were doing with the business plan. We did a mock book and took that to advertisers, which again changed what we were doing in the business plan. The main goal is getting down on paper what it is you are trying to accomplish and making sure the consumer is out there and they want what you think they want. You never really know unless you ask (personal communication, February 24, 2005).
Stone markets *Her Sports* primarily through partnerships with organizations such as Boarding for Breast Cancer, Mountain Bike Chick, Irongirl, World Triathlon Corporation, Activa Diva Club, and Triathlete Magazine. The publication’s presence at the events and affiliation with these major sporting events give the magazine visibility. Additionally, *Her Sports* distributes a monthly newsletter to more than 440,000 active women who have registered for an event through The Active Sports Network.

Most of our marketing is through grass roots means. We participate in events across the country. For example, we were at the Chicago Marathon, Marine Corp Marathon, and the New York Marathon. We also just solidified an incredible partnership with Elite Racing, which puts us at the Rock N Roll Marathon in Arizona, the Rock N Roll Marathon in San Diego, the Country Music Marathon in Nashville, the Virginia Beach Marathon, and the Carlsbad 5K (personal communication, February 24, 2005).

Additionally, Stone continues to conduct research. Reader surveys are conducted to help sell advertisers on the magazine. “We received over 2,000 responses and used that information to help sell advertisers on what a strong, unique demographic we have reached.” (personal communication, February 24, 2005)

Financially, *Her Sports* has broken even with the May/June 2005 issue of the magazine, which surpassed the goals of their business plan. Approximately 65% of the budget comes from advertising, 30% from paid subscriptions, and 5% from newsstand sales. Further, the staff size is kept to a minimum, as part of the plan, with only 6 full-time staff members and three part-time staff members. Between 20 and 30 freelance photographers and writers are also utilized each issue.

**Real Sports Magazine**

*Real Sports* magazine was launched in 1998 and continues to publish, although only as an e-zine, through 2005. The magazine has published as an e-zine for the past 2 years where circulation is limited to Team Real Sports members. The magazine is
published in California by ADL, Inc., bi-monthly at 68 pages an issue. The subscription rate was $16.83 a year, the cover price was $4 an issue, and the advertising rate was $3,150. Real Sports magazine had a circulation of 150,000 and women’s sports coverage at different levels such as the college and professional levels were the editorial focus of the publication (Oxbridge Communications, Inc, 2004).

Amy Love is the CEO of ADL, Inc., a marketing, promotions, publications and events firm. In addition, she is the publisher of Real Sports magazine. Love holds a Bachelor’s degree from Texas Tech University and an MBA from Harvard. She has worked in sales and marketing for various companies such as Procter and Gamble and Booz Allen and Hamilton. As a young girl Love was an active soccer, baseball, and basketball player (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

**Market niche**

Love saw the market niche as fragmented among participants of sports, fans of sports, participants of team sports, and participants of individual sports. As a result, Real Sports chose one of these fragments—fans of women’s sports.

Our niche was to go after the fans of women’s sports because to just go after women the market wasn’t large enough to sustain itself. We were not purposefully choosing to ignore men; we were looking to build a base of fans for women’s sports (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

Due to the wide scope of fans of women’s sports, Real Sports claimed a diverse audience. Approximately 30% of readers were men. The other 70% comprised of women of which there were 2 large yet different age groups of women. One group was women ages 35-55 and the other was composed of young women ages 12-18.

---

1 The advertising price listed for all of the publications in this chapter are based on a full-page, black and white advertisement.
Editorial content

The mission of Real Sports was to be “the authority” of women’s sports, so the editorial content kept the audience up to date on what was happening in the world of women’s sports. Sporting event previews, athlete profiles, educational stories on topics such as “How to get scholarships,” Q&As with athletes, and service stories to help readers become more effective athletes were all components of the editorial makeup of Real Sports.

We were primarily focused on helping people be fans of women’s sports, so that was professional, collegiate, and amateur. It was all about giving them information so as the World Cup was on or as the Olympics were occurring they knew what was going on, who to watch, what to see, and what was happening (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

When it came to reaching these diverse readers Real Sports went with gender neutral writing techniques instead of using devices or a writing style geared more toward women. Additionally, Real Sports drew in the younger readers visually and with editorial departments geared more toward their interests. “Most people called us the SI for women. The writing in SI is the exact editorial approach we took. We used photographs to draw younger readers in while the stories were a bit more sophisticated.” (personal communication, February 26, 2005)

Real Sports often featured a well-known athlete on the cover such as Mia Hamm or Billy Jean King, and authenticity when it came to the cover was paramount.

Mia Hamm was on our cover in which she was running down the field dribbling the ball as intense as can be and in reality that is how she plays but if you look at the WSF cover she was sitting cross legged in front of a goal with makeup on. We’ve never run a posed shot [on the cover] (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

2 Oftentimes editors will use writing techniques that have been show to draw female readers to their publications such as features and first-person stories; however, Love made no special effort to include such techniques.
The failure of many of the women’s professional leagues caused an editorial strain for *Real Sports* because while women tend to be sports-specific fans in general, when it comes to college sports, they are even more focused on a particular team. This made the coverage of college sports less than ideal for *Real Sports*. “When you have a national magazine you need an editorial base to cover and 6 major professional leagues failed after the 1996 Olympics, leaving the WNBA as the only national professional league in the country.” (personal communication, February 26, 2005)

**Business plan**

One year before the launch of *Real Sports*, Love conducted research across the country through national web-based focus groups. These focus groups tested names for the title and the editorial focus. *Real Sports* was launched with the mission of creating a “sports magazine for fans of women’s sports.” The magazine began with a circulation of 50,000, and during the height of *Real Sports* reached 300,000. However, there would be three major business strains: advertising, a lack of editorial content, and a lack of a community interest in women’s sports.

*Real Sports* had difficulty attracting advertisers because of the diverse audience of the magazine.

Advertisers are looking for the most economical means possible to reach as many people as possible. They look for outlets that deliver the message to that very specific niche market. With women’s sports the problem is those who are interested in sports are so fragmented (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

The lack of professional leagues for female athletes also led to the decline of *Real Sports*. After the shutdown of WUSA, they began publishing exclusively as an e-zine.
due to the lack of editorial content. Interested readers subscribe online at to be a member of Team Real Sports where they then have access to the e-zine.

All we were left with was the WNBA and the women’s final four in terms of anything that has national reach and that’s just not enough to sustain a printed publication. Long term I think it is 2 generations away before we see a pick up in women’s sports, but the longevity in having a title out there that continues to publish and remind people that women’s sport are out there is important (personal communication, February 26, 2005).

Women’s Basketball magazine

Women’s Basketball magazine is published bi-monthly in Boston, Massachusetts and owned by Madavor Media, LLC, bi-monthly at 36 pages an issue. The subscription rate is $20 a year, and the cover price is $5 an issue. The advertising rate is $1,200. Women’s Basketball magazine has a circulation of 13,562 and coverage of high school, college and professional women’s basketball is the editorial focus of the publication. The magazine was launched in 1999 and continues to publish through 2005 (Oxbridge Communications, Inc, 2004).

Lois Elfman is the founder and former editor and chief of Women’s Basketball magazine. She was also the editor of International Figure Skating magazine, and she has worked as a freelance editor and writer. Elfman has a degree in psychology and women’s studies from Columbia University. She founded Scence magazine in 2005, which is a national gay lifestyle magazine.

Market niche

When the magazine was first launched Elfman believed there would be a huge market niche for a women’s basketball magazine, but she has since realized that’s not the case. Women’s Basketball never surpassed 15,000 readers. Elfman saw the niche
composed of both fans and participants of women’s basketball. Readers ranged from individuals aged 11 on up; however, most readers were between the ages of 14 and 17.

**Editorial content**

The content of the magazine was centered around professional, college, and high school women’s basketball. Feature stories, profiles, instructional pieces, and Q&As were all editorial components used in the magazine. “I tried to make everything something both fans and participants could use. We used frank, direct writing and centered only on female basketball players.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

The cover often included a woman who had some degree of profile in the basketball world. “Initially it was all WNBA athletes, but then I started including at least 2 college athlete covers a year. It was usually someone both fans and participants would have seen on television.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

**Business plan**

Three years after the launch of *Women’s Basketball* the publication was making money based largely on subscription revenue. The magazine continued to make a small profit by staying “mean and lean.” The number of pages of the magazine was kept down to approximately 36 pages an issue. Additionally, there was no full-time staff. “I was also the editor of another magazine owned by the same company and the art director worked for another title. During most of my tenure there, ad sales were handled by an outside firm.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005) Approximately 19 freelancers including writers and photographers were used to publish an issue of the magazine.

Problems in the business plan occurred due to the low circulation numbers.

---

3 For example the February 2004 issue featured WNBA player Swin Cash.
We never passed 15,000 subscribers. That proved to be quite a challenge. People didn’t seem interested, and we didn’t have the budget to get on television or buy a WNBA sponsorship package (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

In an effort to draw larger circulation numbers, Elfman sent out direct mailings to lists such as competitive girls’ basketball players, developed a relationship with the WNBA, and even briefly advertised on television. However, circulation remained low, which deterred advertisers. “You need serious numbers to attract national advertisers.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

Elfman does believe focusing on one women’s sport was one aspect that gave Women’s Basketball an edge. “Women’s sports fans are much more sports specific, sometimes even right down to a particular team. I don’t find a ton of crossover fans. It is advantageous to be a single-sport publication.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

Women’s Sports and Fitness Magazine

Women’s Sports and Fitness magazine was published 8 times a year in Boulder, Colorado under Women’s Sports and Fitness, Inc., eight times a year. The subscription rate was $19.97. WSF had a circulation of approximately 300,000. The editorial content of the publication focused on women’s sports participation in individual sports (Katz, 1992).

Dagny Scott Barrios is the former editor and chief of Women’s Sports and Fitness, Women Outside, and Running Times magazine. She has a bachelor’s degree in political science and a master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University. Barrios continues to write for various publications such as Runner’s World and is an author who has written “Runner’s World Complete Book of Women’s Running” and
“Runner’s World Guide to Trail Running.” She herself is an avid master’s runner (Rodale, Inc., 2004).

**Market niche**

Barrios saw the women’s sports-magazine market niche at about 200,000 readers with a small core audience. “I maintain there is an audience. I don’t maintain that the core audience is huge, obviously the fitness market is bigger. There are more and more women out there who just want something real.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

*WSF* was geared toward readers between the ages of 25 and 50. “We recognized right away that the women who are interested in this are older and probably have kids and need that time to themselves.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

Additionally, the average reader had an income of $75,000 or more, were college educated, and participated in more than one sport. The sports *WSF* readers gravitated toward were mountain biking, running, and hiking. Outdoor activities were top picks for these readers.

Barrios saw the market for women who weren’t necessarily athletes but individuals who enjoyed getting outside and being active. The factor that linked her readers was the emotional aspect of sports.

We said where’s the common ground, and it’s that we’re all inspired by and share an emotional space. So a first time marathoner and an experienced marathoner share what they get, which is a sense of accomplishment and that was the common ground (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

**Editorial content**

Barrios wanted to make sure the magazine was authentic so activity was a primary editorial focus. Activity, however, was never discussed as a weight loss
solution. “It wasn’t about flatten your abs so you look good in a bathing suit, it was about
strengthen your core to run a faster marathon.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)
The different sections of the magazine reflected these ideas. Generally, the back of the
book tended to be service oriented including exercises, healthy recipes, nutritional
information, and health-related information all of which was geared toward helping the
reader in her sport. The feature well tended to be a mix of profiles, experience-type
stories, travel stories, and product reviews. Profiles were a major editorial component
that often focused on inspirational individuals who weren’t necessarily professional
athletes. “We did a profile on grandmas, ‘Your Grandma Wears Hiking Boots’, and that
generated so much mail because that was something that inspired them. If we did
profiles we tried to make them inspirational.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

Additionally the product reviews weren’t advertiser driven⁴. The products were
first tested by WSF. These product reviews were an import piece to the editorial mix
because until recently, many of the women’s sports apparel and equipment was of poor
quality or too masculine, so as the market exploded WSF tested products, showing the
readers what was available and of good quality.

Editorially celebrities were downplayed. If celebrities were used they were
usually not that well-known and took part in individual sports like the readers of WSF.

We used celebrities that the world outside of women’s sports wouldn’t recognize
readily. The issue before I took over featured Lisa Leslie on the cover, and I
know it actually did very poorly because to our readers she wasn’t someone they
could relate to. They didn’t take part in team sports (personal communication,
March 2, 2005).

⁴ Many magazines have agreements with advertisers to feature their in reviews within the magazine, which
is a conflict of interest.
Examples of athletes WSF used on the cover were Selena Hill, a top mountain climber, and Ruby Hickman, an Olympic 5,000 meter runner.

**Business plan**

Barrios took over the publication after it had already published for several years—WSF was started by Billy Jean King in 1974, so, while Barrios wasn’t involved in the launch of the magazine, she made a few of her own changes to the plan.

When I took over the magazine, I moved the publication from New York to Boulder, Colorado. How can you do a women’s sports publication in New York? How can I hire people who love this and say move to New York? It wasn’t hard to find journalists who were mountain climbers or swimmers. We knew we couldn’t compete with a Self magazine but we could be authentic (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

WSF had a small budget, often publications would be produced on $60,000. The staff of the magazine was kept to a minimum as a result of this with only 7 full-time employees and approximately 24 freelancers per issue. Roughly 10% of the budget came from newsstand sales, 45% from advertising, and 45% from subscriptions. The small budget was, in part, due to the advertising battle.

At the time Barrios was the editor of WSF, advertisers were just beginning to realize that women were spending more than men on sports-related products. However, several advertisers were still leery of advertising directly to women because they knew they needed to create new advertising campaigns, which were expensive. Despite this, there was strong support of the magazine from the core advertisers including New Balance, Reebok, and North Face.

These companies were aligned with us and thought that their products did the same thing that our magazine did. They weren’t going for the person who wore the jacket as a fashion statement, they were going for the person who actually used it in the circumstances they actually created it for. So, we were their niche (personal communication, March 2, 2005).
It would be outside of this core advertising group that *WSF* would struggle for advertising support.

We were not getting many of the women’s lifestyle advertisements\(^5\). They were less inclined to go with us because they knew they had a better venue. They could go with a *Self* or a *Shape*. They had more bang for their buck in the larger publications (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

Marketing efforts also were utilized and mainly consisted on partnerships with women’s sports camps or other organizations that went in line with the magazine’s sport mission.

Under Barrios *WSF* would eventually be bought by Conde Nast. Conde Nast had recently launched *Conde Nast Sports for Women*, which was also struggling with advertisers, but they were unable to attract the core advertisers that helped sustain *WSF*.

They couldn’t get the core advertisers so Conde Nast offered to buy the reputation of the magazine. We folded, and they took the name and put it on their publication. They bought the reputation and legacy—*WSF* was 25 years old at the time (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

Conde Nast published under the *WSF* name for one year, using their own editorial staff and alienating the original core audience. “What they were doing was for an audience that was already having their needs met. *WSF* [the old version] got killed off for things that had nothing to do with the success of the publication.” (personal communication, March 2, 2005)

Despite the fact that Barrios says *WSF* would still be publishing if Conde Nast didn’t buy the publication, there are a few changes she would make.

Ironically, if I were to launch a women’s athletic magazine today I wouldn’t emphasize sports. The market, I believe, lies in a lifestyle magazine that emphasizes health and fitness as a holistic part of a woman’s busy life. In the end, I don’t believe that women follow sports like men do, nor do they get the

---

\(^5\) Lifestyle advertisements include products such as makeup, hair products, and clothing.
same things from sports. Women value athletics, fitness, and their sports for the balance and health they bring to their lives—not in a vacuum (personal communication, March 2, 2005).

**Sports Illustrated for Women**

*Sports Illustrated for Women* magazine was published eight times a year in New York by Time, Inc., at 112 pages an issue. The subscription rate was $11.94 a year, and the advertising rate was $21,500. *Sports Illustrated for Women* magazine had a circulation of 400,000 and the publication focused its editorial content on health, fitness, and general well-being for active women. The magazine was launched in 1999 and ceased publication in 2002 (Bacon’s Information, Inc., 2002).

Susan Casey works as the development editor at Time, Inc. Casey has a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from the University of Arizona. She is the former editor of *SI Women*. She is also the former creative director of *Outside Magazine* and editor at large for Time, Inc. She has written for several publications such as *Esquire, Time, Fortune*, and *Sports Illustrated* (Carr, 2002).

**Market niche**

Casey with *SI Women* approached the market niche as a women’s active lifestyle, athletics market because it had a wider scope and also because the term “sports” seemed to be a deterrent when it came to the audience of this niche.

If you are using the same definition that you use for men’s sports magazines, I would say that the market is very, very small. The women’s active lifestyle, athletics magazine market is much bigger. Women, once they get out of college, for whatever reason even if they are incredible athletes don’t consider themselves athletes, and there’s no real women’s spectator sports market, so that’s why the term sports is kind of loaded (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

So, while Casey’s definition of a women’s sports magazine may have seemed broad, her vision of her audience wasn’t.
The reader that I kept in mind was a 26-year-old who played or performed some sort of sport or athletics throughout their whole life, even if it was just running 10K’s occasionally, had a job, went to college, and was a lot more active than her friends who maybe didn’t have the same sports background that she did. And she wouldn’t necessarily define herself as an athlete, although she is physically adept (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

**Editorial content**

The editorial content of the magazine centered around the idea that the readers were participants of women’s sports, so service stories were a top priority. In addition, the magazine aimed to inspire these participants, so the publication maintained a positive voice and message, which came through with the vibrant re-design Casey initiated when she became the editor and with the editorial mix. Inspirational profiles, discussions of provocative issues, personalities in athletics, and unique sports all added to the editorial makeup of the magazine.

We tried to incorporate a lot of real people stories in there. We really wanted to be inspirational. I think it was really important to show that women who are active in their lives tend to achieve in other areas of their lives. It’s a great thing and a way to build confidence, and a lot of the women’s magazines kind of chip away at confidence and we wanted to be something very different. Yeah, you’re strong, you’re beautiful, you’re cool, and you can do anything you want. And that’s the underlying message of being an athletic female. We brought a lot of readers into the magazine. We celebrated what they were doing (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

Additionally the feature section of the magazine usually had several stories covering both well-known and real world athletes. Adventure stories were also included such as “Temptation Island” sporting activities in Hawaii.

The cover of the magazine was a challenge because Casey and her staff were always looking for athletes who “had it all”—both good looks and an incredible athletic career or lifestyle such as Gabrielle Reece. “We tried to have our cake and it is too. It’s

---

6 This was an example of a story that outlined interesting sports active individuals could take participate in, in different geographic regions.
a hard line to walk. I’d like to change that world, but I sure didn’t create it. How do you make the magazine a huge success and stay true to the authenticity of women’s sports?”

(personal communication, March 5, 2005)

Casey broadly defined sports to create a larger scope, but she was careful to differentiate it from the fitness magazine genre that focuses on weight loss.

We defined sports really, really broadly in *SI Women*. We had a story on alligator wrestling and even the most recreational sports were in there. Basically anything but sitting in a chair was in there. Our fitness component was always through the prism of you’re not in a gym to slim down, it’s really not about how you look, it’s about how it’s a part of you and your lifestyle because you are active and you’re athletic even if you don’t call yourself an athlete (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

**Business plan**

Time, Inc. began *SI Women* with the plan that the title would make money within five years, which is the typical business plan of the company; however, *SI Women* was launched as a “soft launch.”

They said let’s put out a couple of issues and see how it goes. They were sort of dipping their toe in the water and, in retrospect, that was a hard way to do it because the magazine never got momentum. I don’t think there was a grand plan, and I don’t think there was a set timeframe (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

Time, Inc. put out four issues the first year, then 6 issues the next, and 8 issue the third, moving toward 10 issues during the last year. As a result, the launch was very slow and drawn out, which, without a doubt, negatively affected the growth of the magazine.

In addition, *SI Women* was troubled by bad timing.

We actually probably would have made it if we had another couple of years. Timing wise we were unlucky in that the merger of Time, Inc. caused some problems right about the time we were looking for investment money. Another two years and we might have been successful (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

---

7 The company didn’t commit to a long-term plan.
SI Women’s association with SI is a topic Casey has mixed feelings about.

I am of two minds about it. It helped us in that we had more street credibility, we are authorities on sports, but that’s a double edged sword in the women’s market. Women have a strange relationship to the word sports even if they have sports in their lives. They don’t think of themselves as athletes and are nervous about the word sports. Sports Illustrated is clearly a male brand, so it was like giving to us with one hand and taking from the other (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

In fact, Time, Inc. even considered re-launching the magazine under a different name to attract a wider audience. Under the new title, Casey saw the potential of broadening the niche even more and going in the direction that Women’s Health has gone where Casey believes there is a circulation potential of about 600,000 to 700,000.

Still, the affiliation with SI was beneficial when it came to production costs. SI Women was able to use the production staff at SI where all their color and pre-production was done, but Casey hired her own editors because she wanted all the editors to be separate from SI. In addition, Casey hired many new staffers. “I wanted young, talented, hungry professionals. I had a very young, diverse staff. I didn’t have a lot of men on staff, but that wasn’t intentional, I just found a lot of great young women.” (personal communication, March 5, 2005)

Casey came to SI Women well into the launch of the magazine, but she made some major changes of her own to the magazine. One of Casey’s first tasks was to establish a continuum of readers. At the time she took over the audience was extremely fragmented. As a result, Casey focused on the 26-year-old active persona, which led her to re-design the magazine and revamp the sections. However, it wasn’t only readers that reacted positively to this re-design, advertisers were also enthusiastic about it. “The
changes we made to the magazine made advertisers happy. It headed in the direction of
general women’s magazines.” (personal communication, March 5, 2005)

However, advertisers were still less than enthusiastic about the circulation
numbers.

A lot of the advertisers we went for don’t like small magazines and that’s a
problem that any women’s sports magazine is going to have, particularly if it is
not under the umbrella of a large company. Advertisers wanted Time, Inc to say
that they were really behind the magazine. They wanted bigger numbers. Even to
get in to see Procter and Gamble you need to be at a circulation of 1 million, so I
don’t think it is going to be easy for anyone to do this (personal communication,
March 5, 2005).

Despite the credibility SI Women had with big advertisers because it was
associated with Time, Inc., Casey believes a women’s sports magazine may be better
suited to the smaller companies because the major publishing companies have high
circulation expectations.

At Time, Inc we need a certain circulation to make the numbers make sense. No
magazine under 500,000 can really make it and survive, and, theoretically, it is
really hard to be under a million and survive at this company. There’s other
places where a magazine at 200,300,400 circulation can survive and even thrive,
but this wasn’t one of them (personal communication, March 5, 2005).

**Themes of Women’s Sports Magazines**

Several themes arose based on the five interviews with the editors of women’s
sports magazines. The 5 main themes included: variances in defining a women’s sports
magazine, a fragmented audience, the importance of editorial authenticity, the mission of
inspiration, and financial difficulties.

**Vision of a women’s sports magazine**

The mission statements of most sports magazines aim to provide information for
the sports fan. However, when it comes to women’s sports magazines the missions of
each are quite different. For example, *Her Sports*, *SI Women*, and *WSF* focused a great deal on the lifestyle aspect of women’s sports. As a result, these magazines would be likely to include information such as where to bike or climb with friends. However, despite this similarity, there were still differences within this group. Casey of *SI Women* referred to her magazine as more of an active lifestyle publication instead of focusing on what would be perceived as traditional women’s sports. For example, stories on topics such as alligator wrestling would be included in the magazine. Additionally, *Real Sports* and *Women’s Basketball* focused primarily on the sports-viewing aspect of women’s sports seeking out women’s sports fans. Further, the different women’s sports magazines also tended to focus on either team or individual sports. *Her Sports* and *WSF* primarily focused on individual sports such as running or biking while *Women’s Basketball* and *Real Sports* focused a primarily on team sports such as basketball or soccer. Clearly, each editor had a different vision for her publication, making the niche of women’s sports magazines quite diverse.

**Who’s the desired audience?**

A factor that seemed to plague each of the publications was the fragmentation of the audience. Most of the magazines had a broad target age group. For example, the audience of *Her Sports* ranged in age from 25 to 49, and the audience of *WSF* ranged from 25 to 50. *Women’s Basketball* and *Real Sports*, which focus more on the women’s sports fan, even had a teenage grouping within their audience. Oftentimes, they had to make special considerations such as additional pictures or special departments to maintain the interest of this audience.
This fragmented audience presented problems when it came to advertising. For example, *Real Sports* had trouble getting advertisers to sign on because they were targeting a more specific audience for their products.

Not all of the women’s sports publications embraced their younger audience the way *Real Sports* and *Women’s Basketball* did. In fact, Susan Casey of *SI Women* was hired as the editor of the magazine to correct this fragmentation. As a result, she created a 26-year-old persona for which she tailored the editorial content of the magazine. *Her Sports* is a magazine geared toward active women who are busy professionals or mothers and need athletics in their lives so they have time to themselves, clearly targeting women opposed to teens. As a result, it seems the target audience for a women’s sports magazine has yet to be determined since the readers differ a great deal from publication to publication.

**Editorial authenticity**

Authenticity or editorial honesty, accurate representation of athletes and athletic information, and the absence of editorial bias was imperative to the editors of women’s sports magazines. The majority of the editors of these women’s sports publications saw the authenticity of the cover picture as paramount. Editors such as Love of *Real Sports* and Stone of *Her Sports* refused to run a picture of a model posing as an athlete on the cover. In fact, Love had even stricter standards for *Real Sports*. She refused to run even a posed picture of an athlete on the cover. Casey of *SI Women* and Barrios of *WSF* remained true to the authenticity of women’s sports by maintaining an active editorial focus and steering clear of weight loss solutions. Additionally, most of the magazines included profiles about the everyday female athlete. *Her Sports* also made sure all of the
products such as shoes or other athletic equipment were tested for the best function by Her Sports staffers and recommended based on those tests instead of allowing the reviews of such products to be determined by advertisers who simply wanted to promote their products.

Mission of inspiration

Each of the magazines, specifically Her Sports, WSF, and SI Women, made it their mission to inspire readers. Oftentimes, the editors would use profiles of female athletes, both professional and recreational, to inspire and encourage readers. For example, WSF’s story “My Grandma Wears Hiking Boots” allowed readers to see how even older women were active. These profiles often focus on real people who weren’t professional athletes because they tended to be more inspirational to readers due to the ability of readers to relate to them.

Financial difficulties

Most of the editors recognized that there were two major financial issues within the niche: the circulation potential and advertising recruitment.

All five of the publications had difficulty attracting large audience numbers. The largest circulation numbers were posted by SI Women at 400,000. However, SI Women was published by Time, Inc., a major publishing company, which many of the editors agree isn’t an ideal place for publishing a women’s sports magazine because such companies require circulation numbers in the 1 million range to make the venture financially worthwhile. Even the smaller companies that publish women’s sports magazines had difficulties because advertisers wanted to reach the audiences of these
magazines but wanted to see larger circulation numbers. As a result, advertisers often went to *Self* or *Shape*\(^8\) to advertise where they could reach a larger audience.

Advertisers are also deterred by these magazines due to the diverse audience, which makes it difficult to design ads for the publication and reach target audiences.

**Conclusions**

**Market niche**

There were 2 major components in defining the niche of women’s sports magazines—the audience and the selection of sports content.

- **Audience:** The interests of the audience the editors envisioned for their magazines helped each editor define the niche; however, the audiences differed at the varying publications resulting in various views of the niche. *Her Sports*, *SI Women*, and *Women’s Sports and Fitness* focused primarily on attracting an audience of women who recreationally participated in sports. On the other hand, *Women’s Basketball* and *Real Sports* had an audience that was highly composed of fans of women’s sports, creating an entirely different view of the niche.

- **Selection of sports content:** The selection of sports-related content was still another aspect that shaped the niche. *SI Women*, *WSF*, and *Her Sports* focused their sports content on individual sports such as running, biking, and mountain climbing. *Real Sports* and *Women’s Basketball* focused more on team sports such as basketball and soccer.

Collectively, the editors of the 5 women’s sports magazines envisioned 2 versions of the women’s sports-magazine niche. The first envisioned a participatory sports magazine covering individual sports. The second saw a magazine focused on viewing women’s team sports.

**Editorial content**

- **Profiles:** profiles were a major editorial component of women’s sports magazines, especially when it came to the participant-based magazines. These profile stories were used to inspire readers. Most of the profiles with the exception of *Women’s Basketball* and *Real Sports*, were about recreational

---

\(^8\) *Self* has a circulation of 1,314,270 and *Shape* has a circulation of 1,692 (Oxbridge Communications, 2004).
participants in sports, which made them more relatable subjects to readers who were often recreational sports participants themselves.

- **Service Stories**: Service stories were important in all five of the magazines. These stories were basically how-to’s for the readers. For example, the participatory magazines would include stories that helped readers improve their core strength, so they could run a 5K or develop a nutritional plan for optimal performance. Meanwhile, spectator magazines helped readers be fans of women’s sports. For example, breakdowns of which games would be televised and which players to watch would be service stories found in these types of publications. Additionally, spectator magazines would also include some service stories that would benefit individuals who participated in sports, especially for the younger readers with stories such as how to get a sport-related scholarship.

- **Authenticity**: Authenticity was paramount in each of the publications. For the most part, the women’s sports magazines wanted to differentiate themselves from the fitness magazines and by remaining editorially authentic and true to the coverage of sports, they were able to stand alone as their own niche. The mission of authenticity was carried out in many different ways. *WSF* made sure sports equipment and apparel reviews were not biased by advertisers. Several magazines, and especially *Real Sports*, made sure real athletes were on the cover of the magazine opposed to models. Additionally, sports was never referenced as a weight loss solution in any of these magazines.

- **Covers and Titles**: Both the covers and the titles of the women’s sports magazines were simple. The editors wanted readers to know what they were about right from the beginning. All of the titles were very literal, and the magazines featured authentic athletes on the cover so the mission of sports was also clear from the cover.

**Business plan**

- **Research**: Several of the magazines conducted pre-launch research to test potential audience members and pilot issues. Focus groups seemed to be the method of choice. Few publications conducted research after the launch.

- **Staff**: Staff sizes were kept to a minimum due to the small budget of the magazines. Even *SI Women* used staff members from other magazines owned by the company for certain tasks to keep costs down. As a result of the small staff sizes, freelancers were relied upon heavily by these publications.

- **Partnerships**: Partnerships with major sporting events or organizations such as the WNBA were the marketing tool of choice. Partnerships are one of the most cost-effective ways to market a publication nationally.
Ownership: Only 2 of the magazines, WSF and SI Women, were owned by major publishing companies. These were also the only two magazines that would cease publication. The large publishing companies want circulation numbers that reach at least 500,000. However, most of the editors agreed that the women’s sports-magazine niche has a strong core following but not in large numbers. As a result, ownership through smaller companies that can sustain themselves with small profits are ideal publishers for women’s sports magazines.

Advertising and Circulation: Advertising revenue is highly dependant on circulation numbers. However, it would seem a smaller group of individuals are interested in women’s sports magazines. The number of core readers is below 500,000. As a result, the five magazines had trouble attracting advertising, especially those whose products weren’t aligned with sports. For example, Revlon could advertise in SI Women and reach 400,000 women or in Shape and reach more than 1 million women. Not to mention, sport-related advertisers have to tailor their campaigns to more effectively reach women, which is an additional expense.
Sixty percent of new magazines fail in the first year of publication, and, even if a magazine survives the first year, only 20% of magazines survive the first 4 years of publication (Husni, 2004; Daly et al. 1997). The sport magazine niche is even more daunting. *SI Women, WSF, Sporting News,* and *Inside Sports* have all failed within the sport magazine niche since the 1990s (Kobak, 2002).

The findings from this research study suggest: the market niche of women’s sports magazines tends to be diverse and focused either on participation in women’s sports or viewing women’s sports. Additionally, they typically include information on women’s team sports or information on women’s individual sports. The editorial content of women’s sports magazines was dominated by service and profile stories that all worked to provide authentic sport information. Finally, the magazines’ business plans often minimized costs such as staff and engaged in partnership marketing. Research was usually conducted before the launch of each magazine and ownership by smaller companies was ideal. Additionally, low circulation numbers made advertising difficult.

The themes and conclusions were not organized based on the 3 different categories: magazines that have failed, magazines that continue to publish, and magazines that focus on a specific sport because the similarities and differences among the magazines were not consistent with the categories as expected at the outset of the research study. Additionally, the uses and gratifications theory was used in relation to this study because the editors had to determine the needs and wants of their readers in order to formulate
their publications to meet the reader’s needs and wants. This research provides a good foundation for further research in the area of women’s sports magazines because it has compiled information about several of the women’s sports magazines that published in the 1990s from the key players in the niche—the editors of the women’s sports magazines. The researcher will outline a plan for a successful women’s sports magazine based on the findings and research set forth from this study.

**Go Magazine**

**Defining the niche**

The researcher would tailor the magazine to participants of women’s team and individual sports. The women’s sports magazines that tailored their publications to participants of women’s sports had higher circulation numbers, so this vision of the niche seems to appeal to a larger number of women. However, unlike most of the participatory magazines before, the researcher would not limit the discussion of sports to individual sports. The magazines that focused on team sports had a spectator following, but the editors also noticed these readers were often participants of women’s sports as well. Therefore, including team sports may bring more readers to the magazine. As a result, the mission of the magazine would be: The magazine for active, sports-minded women aged 25-40 who participate in sports of any kind.

**Editorial content**

The major editorial component of the magazine would be service stories, following suit with previous women’s sports magazines. Women in general respond well to service stories, and these types of stories would especially be beneficial to women who participate in sports themselves.
Profiles would be another story type that would be imperative to the editorial makeup as was the case with previous women’s sports magazines. Women who participate in sports want to be inspired, and generally women like to connect to other women through stories. As a result, profiles are ideal.

Diverging a bit from the other women’s sports magazines, the researcher would also emphasize health issues in the magazine. Women are the major consumers of health information, so health issues as they relate to sports would help to strengthen the editorial package. However, fitness information related to sports performance would be the only fitness information included. Self and Shape cover fitness information in relation to dieting and appearance through stories such as how to slim down for summer or lose 10 pounds on the peanut butter diet in a week. The fitness market is saturated, so this difference would be important in establishing that the publication is in a very different niche.

Authenticity would be another way in which the magazine would establish itself as a niche just as the other women’s sports magazines did. Finally, the cover and title of the magazine would be clear to the reader, but the main idea that would be portrayed with both would be activity instead of sports. Some of the editors mentioned that women don’t often consider themselves athletes. As a result, the magazine would speak to active women and would be named something along the lines of Women in Motion or Go magazine. The mission of the magazine would be made even clearer by including an athlete on the cover being active in some kind of sport. This way the title wouldn’t deter active women who perhaps don’t consider themselves athletes. Overall, however, the
editorial package would be similar to the previous women’s sports magazines as I believe editorially these magazines were strong, which can be seen by their core following.

**Business plan**

The researcher would suggest the magazine be launched under a small publishing company due to the small revenue potential. Additionally, staff would be kept to a minimum and rely a great deal on freelancers. Again, the potential revenue for such a venture doesn’t seem to be very large, so the lean and mean technique would work best. However, a strong editor would be necessary to oversee the entire project, especially with a small staff. The ideal person would be an active woman who has a strong editorial background but is also business savvy due to the many responsibilities she would have as a result of limited staffing.

Research would be very imperative to the success of the magazine. Extensive pre-launch research would be conducted using pilot issues in a focus group and a survey format with advertisers and potential readers. Additionally, research would be an ongoing endeavor even after the publication was launched. Such continual research would ensure that the magazine is meeting the needs of the actual readers and advertisers of the magazine, instead of basing major decisions on research obtained from potential readers and advertisers pre launch.

Marketing would also be important to the success of the magazine. The idea of creating partnerships with major sporting events and organizations would be a great cost-effective way to get the publication’s name out; however, brand extension would be another part of the marketing plan. Perhaps there could be *Go* golf balls for women or *Go* dry-fit T-shirts or sneakers. Such brand extension would bring recognition to the
name, especially among athletes. The benefits of a strong brand can be seen with *SI Women*; however, unlike *SI Women*, a new women’s sports brand name wouldn’t have to concern itself with changing the brand from male to female. Not to mention, such sales may result in additional revenue for the company.

Finally, the advertising and circulation plan of the magazine would be interrelated. Advertisers that had sport-related products or services would be the primary advertising targets because they wouldn’t have a better publication through which they could specifically reach female athletes. Advertisers with women’s lifestyle products wouldn’t be sought out until the circulation of the magazine was in the half million range. In the meantime, sponsors would be sought out such as women’s sports organizations to support the expenses of the magazine. A strong marketing plan would be the major tool used to increase circulation numbers.

**Limitations**

There were some limitations in this study. The potential for interviewer bias through loaded questions or tone of voice is one such limitation. This may affect the validity of the respondent’s answers. Further, the method also requires interpretation of the respondent’s answers, and, as a result, a different researcher may interpret the same data in slightly different ways but by choosing to study this topic qualitatively, it makes the study more valid because the researcher is able to address questions to the decision-makers themselves. Additionally, because the answers were not in a standard survey format with pre-determined answers, the researcher was able to probe the interviewee further and get added information through these probes as well as through tone of voice. However, the use of in-depth interviews was the ideal way to obtain the thought process
and rationale of each of the editors because interviews are among the best methods to achieve this in-depth look into the interviewees’ minds (McCracken, 1988). A full sample of women’s sports magazines was not obtained for this study due to the fact that Susan Reed of *Women’s Golf* declined to take part in this research study. The information obtained by the editors who did take part in the study may not have been as complete as possible due to the time limitations of the editors. The allotment of 30 minutes to discuss a topic as broad as an entire magazine niche is minimal. Finally, the editors whose publications are still being published seemed to be less candid with some of the questions than those editors whose publications were defunct.

**Future Research**

This study has great heuristic value. The area of women’s sports magazines has little research, so this study provides a good foundation for future research.

Content analysis of several of the women’s sports magazines would shed even more light on this niche. Content analysis that looked at the different editorial techniques of the magazine and the topics discussed and how they relate to sports would be of interest. Such an analysis would allow researchers to compare the actual content to the editor’s visions of the content. Additionally, content analysis would be an ideal way to compare the different magazines, which could suggest possibilities as to why some women’s sports magazines are successful and others are not.

Interviews with current and former readers of women’s sports magazines would also be interesting to determine if the editorial approach taken by the editors of women’s sports magazines met reader’s interest. A discussion of reader’s and their feelings toward the fitness magazines such as *Shape* and *Fitness* or inclusion of readers of *Shape* and...
Fitness in the interviews would be of interest to see how the audience responded to each publication and determine if there are any crossover readers.

Interviews with sport-related companies and products would also be a good area of research to determine what would sell advertisers on a women’s sports magazine. It might also be beneficial to include advertisers that advertise a great deal in women’s magazines to see if there’s anything that would interest them about advertising in a women’s sports magazine. Continued research is needed in this area, because of the benefits of sport-media exposure to women and young girls.
APPENDIX A
EDITOR LETTER

Dear Editor:

Just five months ago we watched as athletes from all over the world—both men and women—competed in Athens. We watched as dreams came to fruition, were shattered, and some are still to be continued in the years to come. However, the memory of several of these athletes has faded despite the fact that coverage of sports is still prominent in the media. And while the media currently focuses on who will play in the Super Bowl, I can’t help but wonder where all the women have gone. What’s happened to Natalie Coughlan, Amanda Beard and Stacy Dragila? These golden girls made headlines until the torch was extinguished, and the media went back to covering traditional men’s sports.

Clearly there’s something missing in our coverage of sports in the media—women. And this is why I have chosen to write you as I search for answers. You have played a central role in trying to change this media trend as an editor for a women’s sports magazine. As a result, I would like to interview you about your experiences at (publication name here). Your interview would be used to further public research in the area of women’s sports magazines as part of my thesis.

I am currently a graduate student at the University of Florida studying mass communications. Coverage of women’s sports has always been of importance to me as a former runner and state finalist in the pole vault. Not to mention, being the first girl in an all boys flag football league at the age of six. My love of sports and great interest in the media has led me to pursue this research. I hope you will join me as I search for answers in this elusive market niche.

I have enclosed an informed consent sheet required by the University of Florida for your review, which, should you take part in, indicates your voluntary participation in the study. I thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any further questions or would like to participate please feel free to contact me at (239) 293-7658 or by email at lisashea26@yahoo.com. I will follow-up with you by phone within a week. Thank you again for your time.

Sincerely,

Lisa Sheaffer
APPENDIX B
IRB FORMS

I am pleased to advise you that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board has recommended approval of this protocol. Based on its review, the UFIRB determined that this research presents no more than minimal risk to participants. Given your protocol, it is essential that you obtain signed documentation of informed consent from each participant. Enclosed is the dated, IRB-approved informed consent to be used when recruiting participants for the research.

It is essential that each of your participants sign a copy of your approved informed consent that bears the IRB stamp and expiration date.

If you wish to make any changes to this protocol, including the need to increase the number of participants authorized, you must disclose your plans before you implement them so that the Board can assess their impact on your protocol. In addition, you must report to the Board any unexpected complications that affect your participants.

If you have not completed this protocol by May 13, 2005, please telephone our office (392-0433), and we will discuss the renewal process with you. It is important that you keep your Department Chair informed about the status of this research protocol.

JF:cll
Informed Consent

Protocol Title: The Elusive Market Niche: An Examination of the Visions, Decisions and Reasoning of Women’s Sports Magazine editors

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the study:
The purpose of the research is to collect preliminary data about how editors make editorial and business decisions in regard to women’s sports magazines.

What you will be asked to do in this study:
You will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview with a graduate-student researcher. The interview will focus on why and how you made certain decisions regarding the content, business plan and overall vision of your magazine. You will not have to answer any question you do not want to answer.

Time Required:
The interview should take no more than one hour of your time.

Risks and Benefits:
I do not believe participation in this study will put you at any risk for physical, economic or psychological harm. There is no benefit to you; however, the information you provide may help journalists and other communicators gain insight into the women’s sports magazine market niche.

Compensation:
There is no compensation for your participation.

Confidentiality:
Your identity will be kept confidential based on the rights afforded under law. Phone interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher. These tapes will later be destroyed. Portions of the interview will be quoted in the research paper with your name and title.

Voluntary participation:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you decide not to participate, there will be no penalty.

Right to withdraw from the study:
You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. In addition, you can choose not to answer any question you do not wish to answer.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:
Lisa Sheaffer, graduate student at the University of Florida, (239) 293-7658
lisashen26@yahoo.com or Julie Dodd, advisor, professor of journalism at the University
of Florida, (352) 392-0452, jdodd@jou.ufl.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:
UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone
392-0433.

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the
procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: [Signature] Date: 2/24/05
Principal Investigator: [Signature] Date: 2/24/05
Lisa Sheaffer, graduate student at the University of Florida, (239) 293-7658
lisashea26@yahoo.com or Julie Dodd, advisor, professor of journalism at the University
of Florida, (352) 392-0452, jdodd@jou.ufl.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:
UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone
392-0433.

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the
procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: [Signature] Date: 2/25/05

Principal Investigator: [Signature] Date: 2/25/05
Lisa Sheaffer, graduate student at the University of Florida. (239) 293-7658  
lisashea26@yahoo.com or Julie Dodd, advisor, professor of journalism at the University of Florida, (352) 392-0452, jdodd@jou.ufl.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:  
UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250: phone 392-0433.

Agreement:  
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: [Signature]  
Date: 3/3/05

Principal Investigator: [Signature]  
Date: 3/2/05
Lisa Sheaffer, graduate student at the University of Florida. (239) 293-7658
lisashea26@yahoo.com or Julie Dodd, advisor, professor of journalism at the University
of Florida, (352) 392-0452, jdodd@iou.ufl.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:
UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone
392-0433.

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the
procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: [Signature] Date: 5/2/05
Principal Investigator: [Signature] Date: 5/2/05
Lisa Sheaffer, graduate student at the University of Florida, (239) 293-7658
lisashe26@yahoo.com or Julie Dodd, advisor, professor of journalism at the University
of Florida, (352) 392-0452, jdoddi0@ufl.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:
UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone
392-0433.

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the
procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: [Signature] Date: 03/05/05
Principal Investigator: [Signature] Date: 03/15/05
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

• RQ 1: How did editors define the market niche of women’s sports magazines?

1. Describe what you see as the market niche for women’s sports magazines?
2. Who did you envision as the readers of your magazine?
   a. Demographics
   b. Men v. Women
   c. Age Range

• RQ 2: What kind of editorial content was used in the publication and why?

1. How did you tailor the publication to the interests of your readers?
   a. Type of editorial Content
   b. Editorial techniques
   c. Design
2. How did you specifically target the female audience?
3. What did you have in mind when you decided on the cover of your magazine in regard to your audience?
   a. Use of celebrities
   b. Active v. passive
4. What was the process in deciding on a name for your magazine?
   a. Attract male readers
   b. Brand recognition
   c. Define identity
5. How did your magazine approach sports?
   a. Types of sports
   b. Health and fitness focus
   c. Professional v. average person
   d. Institutional aspects (i.e. leagues)
6. What did you have in mind when you assembled the editorial staff?
   a. Composition (male to female)
   b. Involved in sports themselves

• RQ 3: What was the magazine’s business plan?

1. What was the business vision for your publication?
   c. Expectations
   d. Deficit allowance
e. Affiliation with sponsors (leagues)
2. Who did you see as the potential advertisers for your publication and who actually advertised within your publication?
   f. Gender neutral for men
   g. Challenges getting advertisers
   h. Effect on content
3. Why do you think your magazine ceased publication (or for those who are still publishing, what have been some difficulties in this niche)?
   i. Editorial content
   j. Advertising
   k. Business
LIST OF REFERENCES.


Bacon’s magazine directory (42nd ed.).(2002). Chicago, Ill: Bacon’s Information Inc.


National College Athletic Association (2003). Sponsorship and participation report from the National College Athletic Association. Indianapolis, IN: NCAA.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lisa Sheaffer has always been interested and active in sports. She began her sporting career at 6 years old, as the first girl to play in a local flag football league. Lisa remained active in sports throughout high school as a runner, on the cross country team, and as a runner and pole vaulter on the track team.

Lisa completed her undergraduate degree in journalism (with a focus on magazines) from the University of Florida (UF) in May 2003. She immediately began work on her Master of Arts in Mass Communication degree at UF. Her journalism experience includes writing for *Florida Physician* magazine and *dr. gator* newsletter; and acting as editorial assistant at Oxendine Publishing, and as senior editor for the *Orange and Blue* magazine. Currently, Lisa works at the Visiting Nurse Association in Vero Beach, as a Community Relations Specialist; and also works as a freelance health writer for *Gulfshore Life* magazine.