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## THE MEDIA DICHOTOMY OF SPORT HEROS AND SPORT CELEBRITIES: MARKETING OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S TENNIS PLAYERS

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*The modern sports hero is actually a misnomer for the sports celebrity. Critics have noted true sports heroes are an endangered species, whereas sports celebrities are as common as Texas cockroaches. On the surface professional sports seem to offer a natural source for heroes, but on closer examination they offer celebrated sports figures shaped, fashioned, and marketed as heroic.*

-SUSAN DRUCKER

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### Introduction

There is perhaps no better example of media-created frenzy over heroism and celebrity than in the world of professional women's tennis. Two of the most recognizable personalities, Venus Williams and Anna Kournikova, are known for very different reasons: Williams because of her on-court success and her rivalry with her sister Serena, Kournikova because of her on-court failures yet curiously strong endorsement success. Survey research was undertaken to examine perceptions of both women, to determine a) how society views them (as heroes or celebrities), and b) to determine their marketing worth, with regards to consumer intention to purchase an endorsed product. The research was conducted in three phases during 2001-2002, with a research framework being constructed consistent with previous studies of this nature. Burton (2001) establishes two real concerns for research based on celebrity endorsers: 1) "can a celebrity endorser provide multiple meanings or cross easily between targeted groups?" and 2) "what drives a consumer's celebrity elaborations, when a celebrity's image is transformed by unpredictable real-life actions?" Additionally, Burton questions the popular "Q" score rating system - commonly used in marketing - because it focuses upon likeability and fame, and ignores many of the significant values

important to the consumer: source relevance, authenticity, and trustworthiness. Chalip (1997) contends that it is possible to be an unknown hero, but not an unknown celebrity. The primary focus of Chalip's work is that heroism depends on celebrity, although one need not be a hero to become a celebrity. This notion refers to the idea that the media creates celebrities, that these celebrities are fleeting, and that they aren't real heroes to most people. Finally, Brooks (1998) provided a strong overview of theory and issues related to celebrity endorsement involving athletes. Brooks asked what type of celebrity athlete is most effective, under what conditions, and most importantly, do athletes sell products? Brooks also stated that the answer to the question "does a (sport) hero have more cultural meaning than a (sport) celebrity?" would have tremendous impact for marketers. Given the fact that our heroes change as quickly as does the programming on television (Leonard, 1980), it was crucial to reassess the true value of sport heroes and celebrities, and the tremendous impact that the media plays in creating them in our country.

### Justifying the Research

The research was shaped heavily by suggested future research directions by three eminent sport hero scholars. Burton (2001) challenged researchers to better "understand how heroes are created and, if not worshipped, revered." He also questioned the popular "Q" score rating system commonly used in marketing. Burton claimed that Q-scores, which focus predominantly upon likeability and fame, might not be truly indicative of celebrity athlete endorsement phenomena.

Brooks (1998) was thorough in her research and posed the question "does a hero have more cultural meaning than a celebrity?" Brooks contended that answering this question could potentially have a tremendous impact for marketers.

Chalip (1997) examined the hero vs. celebrity debate in sport, and opined similarly to both Burton (2001) and Brooks (1998). A key contribution of his work was proposing that future research should attempt to combine elements of celebrity endorsement and hero worship.

### Salient Quotations

- "We are drawn to celebrities for a variety of

reasons. These can only be concretely established through empirical investigation. At the level of theory, it might be hypothesized, inter alia, that celebrities provide us with heroic role models in an age of mass standardization and predictability.” - Rojek (2001)

- “Perhaps the athlete did not seek fame, but notoriety finds the athlete anyway in an era relentless television and burgeoning hero worship.” - Ham (2001)
- “Heroes symbolize something greater than attaining wealth and fame, performing death-defying acts, or acquiring media-promoted status. They reflect our values, our ideals, our dreams. Their qualities endure as a guide and inspiration for all of us to be heroes. It’s time for heroes, again.” - Sanchez (2000)

### **Statement of the Problem & Purpose of the Study**

“Sports figures fit the mold of the typical national hero. From humble socio-economic class backgrounds, they demonstrate self reliance, determination, courage, adventure, and honesty” (Porter, 1983). Throughout the ages, our world has changed dramatically, in terms of technology, societal makeup, and probably most importantly to this study, media coverage. However, throughout it all, the generally accepted definition of the sport hero has remained fairly constant with what Porter (1983) states. One of the most impressionable target markets is the college-aged population, for several reasons. One, this is a group that after living at home for most of their lives, is now on their own for the first time; conversely, this is the first time this group has spending power, although not on a great scale. Much of mass mediated marketing efforts are geared towards the 18-22 year old age group, traditionally regarding as college-aged students. The purpose of this study, hence, was to survey college students; most previous research ignores this target market (Harris, 1994). A preliminary examination of athletic heroes was made so that a secondary study, to determine product endorser effectiveness, could be undertaken to assess athlete impact upon on sales returns. As stated in the introduction, the focus of this study was on women’s tennis players Venus Williams and Anna Kournikova, although selected research results of other athletes in the study will be included for comparison purposes. The ultimate goal of the study was to determine

whether sport heroes were different from sport celebrities.

### **Background of the Study**

The premier scholar in the field of hero worship is Orrin Klapp (1949). Many other researchers have added to the knowledge base over the years, but Klapp is the one person who everyone ultimately comes back to. His seminal writings included the often-repeated 5-stage process in the development of a societal hero:

1. the person begins to be recognized during informal events.
2. the person is formally recognized as a hero.
3. the image-building process takes place as the person attains a somewhat legendary status.
4. commemoration/celebration
5. cult-status

Klapp was quick to point out that stages 4 & 5 usually occur post-mortem, although this is not necessarily always the case. It is important to point out, though, the importance in the sport realm of this statement. Given the media’s fleeting nature, and our society’s forgiving quality, it is not hard to understand why much maligned athletes become more revered years after retirement and/or death. As humans, we tend to soften the past in our minds, glorifying good acts and forgetting or minimizing the negatives. Thusly, a Babe Ruth (considered a womanizing alcoholic scoundrel during his playing days) can in time become one of the most respected and loved heroes of all-time. Further clouding the picture is the fact that, as Burton (2001) pointed out, depending upon the product and marketing strategy, someone with a negative or counter-culture image, an anti-hero, might actually be preferred over someone with a cleaner image.

Leonard (1980) made an important contribution with his comparative study which examined the changing state of heroes as the cultural makeup of America changed. Considering what has been said previously regarding the impact of constantly evolving television coverage, it is interesting to look at how something fictitious, the novelized creation of fictional sports hero Frank Merriwell (who disappeared in print in 1915) created a real world craving for admirable athletes. Successive generations in Leonard’s paper all were tied to themes of the decade that were accurately reflected

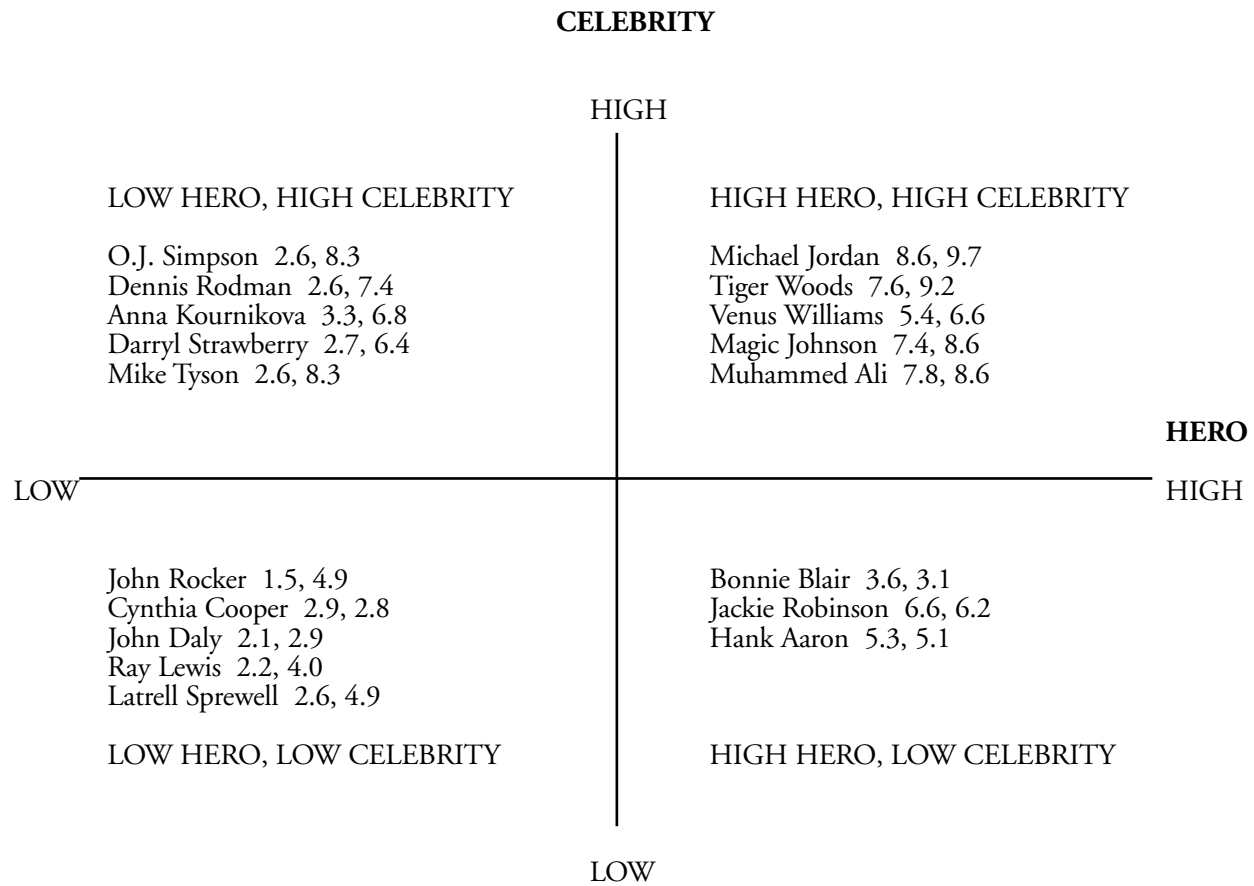


Figure 1: Celebrity-Hero Matrix

with the popular sports heroes of that age. Vander Velden (1986) conducted research on 'favorite' and 'admirable' athletes, stopping short of proclaiming athletes as heroes of sport. He concluded that many people indicated reluctance when approached about heroes, but had no problem discussing their favorite or most-admired athletes. The findings of this study were consistent with prior sport hero studies and are therefore considered a solid piece of the foundational literature.

Ohanian's (1991) structural framework for celebrity endorsement research was the piece that bridged the sport hero literature to the endorsement literature. Contrary to earlier models, discussed at length in Ohanian (1990, 1991), this study provided a comprehensive element that had never been used before. Ohanian discussed and test the three main constructs that lead to 'intent to purchase' an endorsed product. These constructs are a) attractiveness, b) trustworthiness, and c) expertise. Each construct had 5 sub-

constructs that were tested and analyzed using factor analysis.

### Building Upon the Literature

None of the previous studies had effectively synthesized the knowledge of heroes with marketers' portrayal of the endorsers, at least not in the athletic setting. This study combined elements previously uncombined, and helped to develop a model for subsequent studies of the athlete as hero and endorser. Specific attention was paid to women athletes, particularly women's tennis players. The media coverage of women, and the endorsement money involved with women athletes, is dramatically different from that of their male counterparts.

### Methods & Procedures

#### a) Design

- 3-phases administration of surveys
- aimed at college students.

## b) The Sample

- 222 respondents
- convenience and purposive samples

## c) Instrument(s)

- 4 parts, based on literature.
- all instruments were tested for reliability and validity
- previous studies of endorser effectiveness focused on 1 of the 3 dimensions of source credibility (seen in Ohanian, 1991 figure); this study implemented all 3 simultaneously; focus on hero/celebrity.
- respondents were asked to rate 52 athletes (see next page for complete list) on a hero scale and a celebrity scale.

## d) Athletes selected for the study

- all athletes selected in known prior research studies on sport heroes, celebrities, icons, and favorite players were included on a “master list”. Additionally, a panel of experts was asked to review this list and names were strategically added (or deleted) based on relevance and a pilot study using the full list. Additionally, all athletes appearing on the annual “Forbes Celebrity 100” list (2002) were added, resulting in the total of 52 athletes for the Phase 3 administration.

## Results

Once all of the athletes were rated, it was possible to create a celebrity-hero matrix which indicated in which of four quadrants - high hero, high celebrity; high hero, low celebrity; low hero, high celebrity; low hero, low celebrity - each belonged. The exemplary athletes for the four quadrants are indicated by Figure 1.

From each quadrant, one male and one female were selected, so that the next phase of the study consisted of eight athletes. Venus Williams was considered by respondents to be part of the HIGH HERO, HIGH CELEBRITY category, meaning that people considered her to be very much a celebrity, and also considered her to be a hero. Tiger Woods was her top male counterpart in this same category. In the LOW HERO, HIGH CELEBRITY category was Anna Kournikova (and Mike Tyson). Both were recognized as celebrities, but few considered either to be heroic. In the LOW HERO, LOW CELEBRITY category was Ray Lewis and Cynthia Cooper, and in the HIGH HERO, LOW CELEBRITY category was Bonnie

Blair and Hank Aaron. The phase-3 survey was constructed, based on the above athletes and their endorsement of a fictitious sport-drink product.

To the question “do you have a famous sports hero?“, 75.5% of those in the Phase One administration said “yes”, vs. 82.5% of those in Phase Two who answered “yes”. The top sports heroes selected (on a 10-point scale) were: Michael Jordan (8.588), Muhammed Ali (7.784), Tiger Woods (7.578), Babe Ruth (7.411), Magic Johnson (7.401), and Jackie Robinson (6.578). There were only two women chosen in the top 20, the first one being Venus Williams (5.372).

The sport celebrity list contained quite a different mix of athletes. The top celebrity was Michael Jordan (9.696), proving his universal appeal among college students, and confirming what we already know: he is an excellent product endorser. The rest of the celebrities are as follows: Tiger Woods (9.166), Magic Johnson (8.627), Muhammed Ali (8.588), Shaquille O’Neal (8.568), O.J. Simpson (8.303), Babe Ruth (8.186), Mike Tyson (8.176), Andre Agassi (7.735), Wayne Gretzky (7.686), and Dennis Rodman (7.421). The two top female sport celebrities were #17 Anna Kournikova (6.813) and #18 Venus Williams (6.617). The overlap on the first few athletes, such as Michael Jordan, Muhammed Ali, and Tiger Woods on both lists is not surprising. However, the two lists are quite different, indicating that college students can indeed differentiate between sports heroes and sports celebrities; or at least have clear perceptions of what each is composed.

More interesting and applicable to this study is the mathematical discrepancy, derived by taking the difference score between the two rankings. Because Venus Williams had relatively high scores on both the hero and celebrity scales, she did not factor into the difference score; however, Kournikova had the fifth highest discrepancy between her celebrity (6.81) and hero (3.27) score, resulting in a difference of 3.53. It should be noted that there were only six athletes from the entire study of 52 that had significantly high discrepancies between their two scores.

An additional research question asked “How do the hero and celebrity constructs impact the consumer’s intent to purchase the endorsed

product?” Results were tabulated and analyzed for all 8 of the athletes in the final phase of the study. Female respondents were far less likely to purchase endorsed products than their male respondent counterparts. Overall, males were far more likely to consider the 8 athletes (Ray Lewis, Hank Aaron, Tiger Woods, Mike Tyson, Anna Kournikova, Cynthia Cooper, Bonnie Blair, and Venus Williams) heroes than were their female counterparts. The female endorsers were, probably not surprisingly, ranked considerably lower by both the male and female respondents. Conclusively, with the total sample of 120 (phase two), none of the endorsers proved to be exemplary endorsers in terms of their impact on intention to purchase. The top endorser for the entire sample was Tiger Woods (3.80), followed by Hank Aaron (3.03), Venus Williams (3.15), Mike Tyson (2.80), Ray Lewis (2.75), Cynthia Cooper (2.43), Anna Kournikova (2.40), and Bonnie Blair (2.38).

However, the focus of this study is on the two women’s tennis players, Anna Kournikova and Venus Williams. Only the results pertaining to these two will be presented here. The “endorser rating” is particularly interesting. It is interesting to see that among males, Venus Williams had a higher hero rating (3.47) than Kournikova (3.07), but a lower celebrity rating (4.93) than Kournikova (5.20). However, in terms of ‘intent to purchase’ the endorsed product, males were more likely to buy from Williams (3.53) than from Kournikova (2.87). Among female respondents, Williams again rated higher (3.13) than Kournikova (2.17) on the hero scale, and also rated higher on the celebrity scale (5.47) than did Kournikova (4.10). The overall ‘intent to purchase’ numbers were extremely low for both, although female respondents were slightly more likely to buy from Williams (2.77) than from Kournikova (1.93). In terms of the total of 120 respondents in that phase of the study, college students were more likely to buy from Venus Williams (3.15) than from Anna Kournikova (2.40). These numbers are significantly lower than the numbers for nearly all of the male athlete endorsers.

Additionally, correlations and linear regression were very telling concerning intention to purchase the endorsed product. The results are explained as such: the first number is the Pearson correlation for each, in terms of correlation to intention to

purchased the endorsed product. The second number (in parentheses) is the P-value. All numbers are examined at the .05 significance level. Immediately following, for all 8 endorsers, is a quick summary of salient numbers from the linear regression. The regression equation for this is  $Y_1$  (dependent variable, i.e. intent to buy) =  $a + bx_1$  (independent variable, i.e. hero) +  $cx_2$  (independent variable, i.e. celebrity). Results for the two tennis players are as follows:

- Anna Kournikova: both were correlated - Hero .493 (.000) and Celebrity .311 (.008), with intention to buy. The R Square was, as explained earlier, low at .246. Again, hero (.509 coefficient and .152 Std. Error) was significant (.001) and celebrity (.065
- Venus Williams: both were correlated - Hero .481 (.000) and Celebrity .240 (.033). The R Square was .232. Like several others, the regression showed that hero (.539 coefficient and .150 Std. Error) was significant (.001) and celebrity (.034 coefficient and .146 Std. Error) was not significant (.813), at the 5% level of significance.

Overall, endorsers had statistically significant scores on the hero construct. None of the endorsers had statistical significance on the celebrity construct. This would indicate that sport heroes are stronger predictors of intention to purchase the endorsed product than sport celebrities. This again supports the main premise of this investigation, which had hypothesized a stronger emotional connection (and subsequent stronger selling power) of sport heroes over sport celebrities.

### Summary

Smith’s (1973) assertion that the sport hero is dead is one that has never been realized. One could never have imagined how powerful and domineering the mass media would become, nor could it predict how intertwined the media would be with the development and ascension of sport heroes in the 21st century. Innovation and technology have aided the growth of the sports industry, and it is interesting to note that many of the things we now take for granted - reading newspapers online, instant access to statistics and scores, and digital satellite television - are things that were unfathomable when much of the theory on hero worship in America was first developed and tested. Most of the original sociological theory

still pertains, with minor modification. It is clear that sport heroes will always be a solid piece of American societal makeup. What is still unclear is the ability of the average consumer to differentiate between truly heroic people/events and things that are merely glamorized in the media (e.g. celebrities). However, the tragic events of 9-11-2001 helped society to re-focus on heroes. The focus on the actions (heroic deeds) of the firefighters and volunteer workers positively contributed to a nationwide reconsideration of ideals, values and morals. Inherent with this rethinking was a return to the classic definition of the hero (Klapp, 1969), whereby professional athletes were relegated to celebrity status. The occurrence of true heroism, by classic standards, is rarely achieved in sport. Here is prime evidence of truth in such a statement: Anna Kournikova, voted the "Sexiest Woman in America" in 2002 by FHM Magazine, was winless in her sport of tennis during this same timeframe. As Chalip (1997) so astutely opined, being a sport celebrity can result from sport heroism; however, being a sport celebrity does not guarantee that one will become a sport hero. The media to a large extent controls this, and unfortunately in the game of tennis, the marketing emphasis has been placed on the sexual appeal of the players. As evidenced by this study, despite the fact that people like to look at these women, this shortsightedness is likely hurting the integrity of the game. But for now, it is the only way that they can find to sell the sport to consumers.

The findings of this study and others (Burton, 2001; Ohanian, 1991) confirm the belief that someone known as both a hero and celebrity will prove to be the most effective spokesperson for products. The way that the media operates, there are few people who seem to embody the qualities of hero and celebrity. Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods are two exemplary characters in this vein.

Men, more likely than women, appear to be influenced to purchase by celebrity sports endorsers. This is developed in the study and seems to make sense logically. It is perceived that this trend may be moving toward a greater level of equality, in light of the development and growth of several women's professional sports leagues (ex: WNBA, WUSA). The status of these leagues is something that was a non-issue before 1996-1997.

The rise of women's professional basketball, and most recently women's professional soccer and tennis, is certain to impact, at least for younger women, the selection processes of famous sport heroes. However, women are still more likely to idolize male heroes, despite the growing appearance and recognition of, more female sports heroes in the media. As women's sports continue to develop, and catch up to men's sports, it would seem that eventually there will be a swing to famous female sports heroes for young girls. Males should continue to be relatively unaffected.

One of the eight exemplary athletes in the second phase of the study, Anna Kournikova, recently suffered a tarnished reputation. Kournikova, mainly because of her inability to win tennis matches, has been dropped from several of her endorsement contracts in recent months, despite continuing to be a popular pin-up figure in the media. Most recently, she unwillingly appeared in an issue of Penthouse magazine; although it was later determined that the photos were doctored and were, in fact, not her, her marketability was negatively affected. This supports Burton's (2001) assertion that although negative publicity for athletes is not necessarily bad, it is also an inconsistent and unpredictable force which can adversely affect the endorser's ability to do what they do best, help companies to sell products.

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