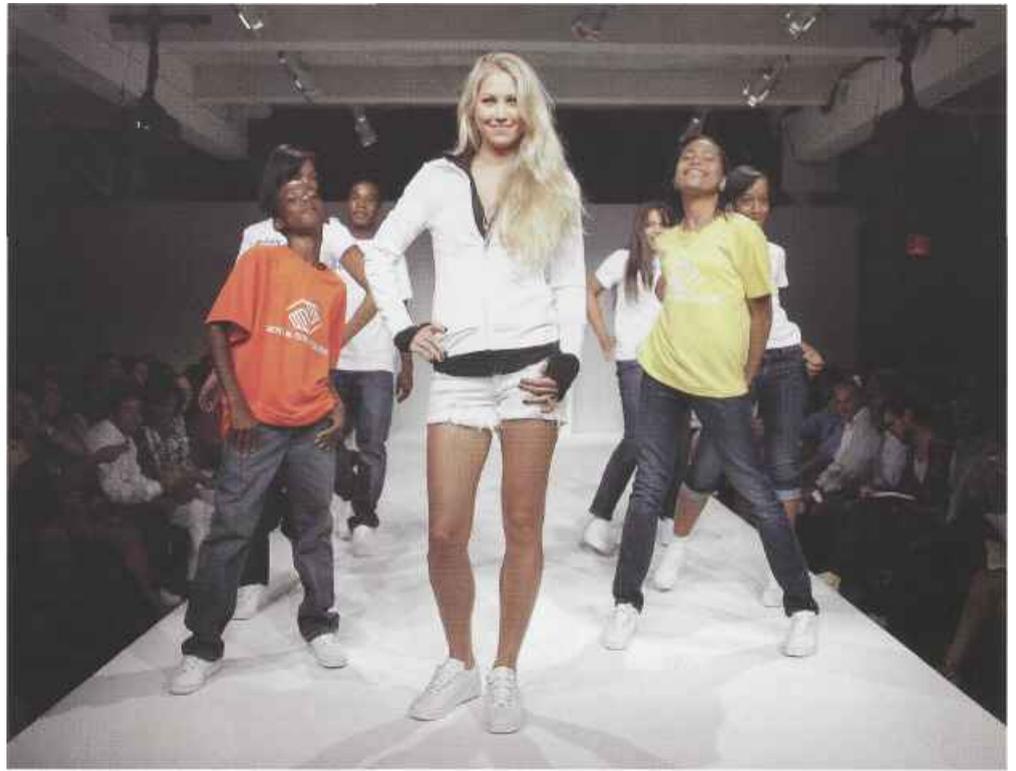


Matéria



Modelling sports stars - Getty Images Sport

THE DEBATE GOES ON...

Results on the track, pitch, court, pool or field have given triumphant female athletes a huge increase in media attention over the last few years. Yet the debate over how women's sport, and its top stars, should be marketed and portrayed by sponsors and the media continues to rage. By **Richard Gillis**.

TO BEGIN TO ADDRESS some one of the biggest questions in sports marketing, let us go back in time to the weeks running up to the Wimbledon 2001. Hundreds of billboards across London began showing a poster of Russian tennis player Anna Kournikova. Travellers on the British capital's underground Tube network were confronted by the image of Kournikova wearing a Berlei sports bra, smiling alongside the strapline: 'Only the balls should bounce'.

The poster was wallpapered across every station concourse, newspapers picked up on it, editorials were run, what's going on? The results were astonishing. Sales of the Berlei Aftershock sports bra doubled, creating a hot new market in the previously moribund sector of sports underwear. Rival players noted the size and number of her endorsement deals - Berlei reputedly paid £2 million, as did adidas - and event promoters reported jumps in ticket sales of between 50-70 per cent when she appeared. Most significantly for the future of women's sport, the only figure that remained on zero was in the column devoted to Kournikova's singles tournament victories.

"She highlighted the potential power of women's sport," says Clifford Bloxham, head of athlete representation at Octagon, who managed Kournikova during this period. "But there are a lot of attractive sports people who are not superstars, and whatever you say about Kournikova, she had both an identity and a

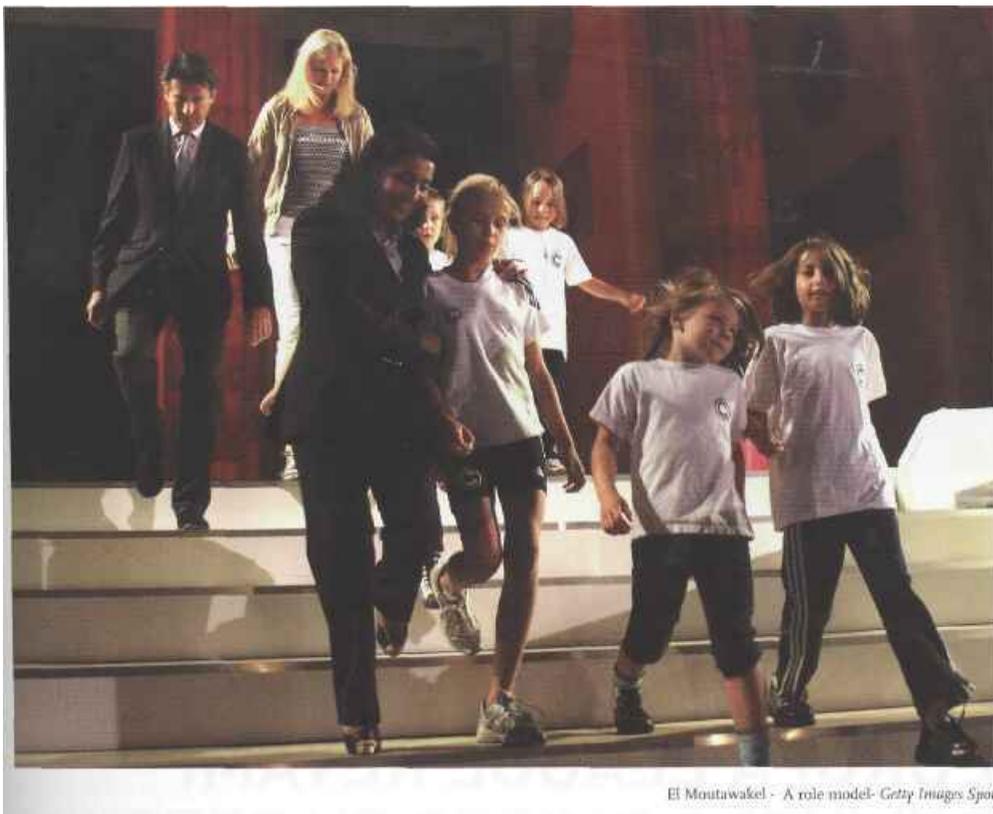
personality that brands could build around".

Supporters of Kournikova cite the benefits she brought to the image of women's tennis, say she was a better player than she is given credit for (she was world number one as a junior) and that she was merely using the assets she had at her disposal. Yet for Lord David Puttnam, Oscar winning film director and outgoing president of Unicef the United Nations children's fund, Anna Kournikova's legacy has caused real damage to the image of women's sport.

Role models

"The way in which women are marketed in sport has to be looked at and not through the lens of western media but from the culture that they have emerged from", Puttnam, told SportBusiness. He cites the example of Nawal El Moutawakel as an example of a positive sporting role model. El Moutawakel won the 400 metres gold medal at the 1984 LA Olympics, the first Muslim woman born on the continent of Africa to win Olympic gold. She is now an IOC Member and Morocco's Minister for Sport as well as an Ambassador for UNICEF Morocco.

"Moroccan attitudes to women have been completely transformed by her: they have had to rewrite all the rules. What her medal did for women in Morocco is not anything we in the West can fully understand," says Puttnam. "We (in the developed world) bring a whole series of prejudices and assumptions of something



El Moutawakel - A role model- Getty Images Sport

Anna Rawson's Guide to promoting women's golf (as told to ESPN)

1. **Rock the tee:** Every player tees off on the first and is introduced on the 18th to their favourite tune.
2. **Play with Tiger:** A small number of tournaments with limited fields of 75 from the men's and women's tours.
3. **Course to catwalk:** At each event a designer creates a piece of clothing or an accessory for the winner who is then flown to LA or New York on the Monday to shoot it for Vogue, Elle and Cosmopolitan.
4. **Get in close:** Every group should be miked up and followed by its own camera crew.

close to gender equality. But we have to look at it through their eyes. Their attitude is how could she be a world champion, she's a girl?

"Sport is a brilliant device for rooting girls into school and keeping them there, which is important, because keeping them there is often harder than getting them there. It also breaks down family attitudes. You go to any part of the Third World and women are absolutely second-class citizens on a line between tragically second-class citizens or merely marginalised. Then, suddenly there is a girl who excels in sport. That changes minds".

Puttnam makes his point powerfully, but whatever your opinion, it was undisputedly Anna Kournikova who created a new marketing landscape for women and sport. It is a landscape in which some of today's generation of women sports stars are thriving commercially, but one

in which not all are considered marketable and in which others, regarded as stars, are still seeing mixed results.

Let's take women's golf and Morgan Pressel and Michelle Wie as an example. Both quickly caught the eye of the marketing industry. When Wie turned professional on her 16th birthday the event was carried by global news channels and triggered a series of lucrative endorsement contracts. Since then, she has perhaps struggled to fulfil her undoubted potential, while Pressel, who first qualified for the US Open when just 12 years old, turned her potential into achievement - becoming the youngest woman ever to win a 'Major' the 2007 Nabisco Championship. She along with Natalie Gulbis and Paula Creamer are promoted as the new faces of women's golf, mirroring the WTA's post-Kournikova strategy. In Europe, Henrietta Zuel was the youngest golfer ever to play on the Ladies European Tour aged 13. Five years later, she has signed up with pop impresario Simon Fuller's 19 management company, taking her place alongside David Beckham and Claudia Schiffer on his roster.

Olympic ambition

And last season, the Ladies European Tour welcomed the young Russian player Maria Verchenova in to its ranks. After playing in only a small handful of events, she was used by promoters of the Turkish Open as the poster girl for the tournament. IMG signed her up, with an eye to using her as the public face of golf in Russia, where they have course design and construction plans. And now, with golf an Olympic sport, IMG and Verchenova will be well placed to access the increased government funds sure to flow from the Kremlin.

To further illustrate the complexity of the sports marketing landscape where women's sport is concerned, we travel to Australia, to

a small tournament in which another young sports woman was making a media splash... for different reasons. Anna Rawson played for three years on the Ladies European Tour before heading off to the States at the start of 2009 to try her luck on the LPGA. In January however, she was in her own backyard, being interviewed for a local TV station. The reporter posed the question: What can Ladies golf do to make itself more popular, more like tennis?

Sponsor power

Rawson was familiar with the line of questioning. When she's not playing golf she makes a good living as a fashion model, so her views on 'sexing up' golf have an added frisson. She threw out a few suggestions (see box), but said that, on the whole, she felt things were improving. But she didn't just say that. She said that the game was shedding its 'dyke' image. Mistake. The interview was quickly relayed to LPGA headquarters in the States where a few weeks later, the then tour commissioner Caroline Bivens, welcomed Rawson to the LPGA by making her stand up at a full meeting of the tour's players and apologise for using the 'D Word'.

Ironically, Rawson's public humiliation was to be one of Bivens' final actions as LPGA Commissioner. In an entirely unrelated development, she was later ousted by player power and her own hubris. Bivens had lost the faith of the tour's real powerbrokers, the event sponsors. Those that market the sport.

Next year, the LPGA will host just 14 events, compared to the 31 it boasted at the start of the 2009 season. Some of this is due to the dire global financial picture, but not all. Bivens went in heavy at the LPGA to clear out what she saw as the dead wood, the events on the tour that lost money, and had to be supported by LPGA central funds. But some of these, were run by promoters and sponsors who had supported the tour for decades, and her demands for more money were met with the sound of doors closing as sponsors exited the sport.

Sensing that their playing (and marketing) opportunities were being compromised, leading LPGA stars, including Paula Creamer, Morgan Pressel and Michele Wie, met and cooked up a plan to overthrow Bivens. From there it was a matter of time before the commissioner was forced to fall on her sword, leaving the American game in a demoralised state and seeking a new way of promoting women's sport.

The debate on how best to market women's sports and its stars will be continued at the Women and Sport Conference in London on November 27. Speakers include the BBC, IRB, ICC and Nike. See unww.womenandsport.co.uk for further information.