

# **Serious Athletes or Media Clowns? Female and Male Wrestlers' Perceptions of Media Constructions**

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The present study explores Norwegian female and male elite wrestlers' perceptions of media coverage of wrestling and of themselves as athletes. In-depth interviews were conducted with four female and four male elite wrestlers. Data analysis revealed that the wrestlers experienced media attention as limited and gender stereotyped, with a dominant focus on hegemonic masculinity. In addition, the wrestlers perceived that media coverage distorted their sport performance by focusing on sensational aspects and scandals rather than on actual performances and results. Some of the athletes' descriptions of representations in the sports media and commercial television illustrated that, in their perception, they were viewed more as media clowns than as serious athletes.

La présente étude explore les perceptions des lutteuses et lutteurs d'élite de la Norvège en ce qui a trait à la couverture médiatique de la lutte et d'eux-mêmes, comme athlètes. Des entrevues en profondeur ont été réalisées auprès de quatre lutteurs et quatre lutteuses. Les résultats de l'analyse de données sont à l'effet que les lutteurs et lutteuses ont perçu recevoir une attention limitée de la part des médias ainsi qu'une couverture médiatique stéréotypée selon le genre, avec une prédominance de la masculinité hégémonique. En plus, les athlètes ont senti que les médias déformaient leur performance sportive en se centrant sur des aspects sensationnels et sur des scandales plutôt que sur les performances et résultats réels. Quelques-unes de leurs descriptions des représentations dans les médias sportifs et à la télévision commerciale illustrent qu'ils et elles étaient vus davantage en tant que clowns médiatiques qu'en tant qu'athlètes sérieux.

Sport is entertainment in today's society. Athletic rivalry and competition fascinate the public, and technology makes it possible for the public to see, hear, and understand the selected versions conveyed by the media. Journalists play a

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crucial role in producing athletes and athletic events as marketable commodities, and the media seem to have changed the Olympic motto from “faster, higher, and stronger” to “sensationalize, scandalize, and entertain.” The Harding–Kerrigan incident, for example, shows how the media use sport to create athletic melodramas for television (Stoloff, 2000), as well as how media-sport personnel use visual and verbal codes to frame and present athletes (Maguire, 1999) in ways that allow for a variety of interpretations.

Scholars have analyzed the content of media coverage using quantitative and qualitative analyses. Scholarly research, however, has paid little attention to the ways in which the subjects of this media coverage perceive it. The purpose of this study therefore is to explore how amateur wrestlers experience the ways they and their sport are covered by the media.

Understandings of wrestling, like other body-contact sports, strongly relate to commonly held perceptions of masculinity, and the media use their sport coverage to celebrate certain ways of doing/practicing masculinity (Messner, 1992). Hence, the investigation draws on theoretical perspectives of gender, elaborated by Connell (1987, 1995), that are derived from hegemonic theory. These perspectives are outlined in connection with media representations of sport in which, according to Messner (2002), hegemonic masculinity is the guiding principle. The present study seeks to add knowledge to an unexplored field of research by focusing on the wrestlers’ negotiation of media portrayals of themselves in relation to their roles as athletes and gender constructions. The study sheds light on athlete’s gender constructions in comparison with the gendered constructions conveyed by the media, as well as the impact of the media representations on the wrestlers’ self-perception. Initially, a brief history of wrestling is presented as a backdrop for understanding the media coverage of wrestling in general, and of gender issues specifically.

## Wrestling: A Male-Dominated Sport

Wrestling is one of the world’s oldest sports, with a history that extends back thousands of years. Paintings from Egypt dated about 3000 BC are believed to be the oldest evidence of the sport. In Greece, wrestling is included in the stories and legends from the early poets and storytellers. For example, Homer gives an account of wrestling matches in *The Iliad*, probably in the ninth century BC. From the Roman Empire, wrestling scenes are found in wall paintings dating from the fifth century BC (Kent, 1968). Although the history of women wrestling in ancient times is largely unrecorded, some documentation does exist. The evidence suggests that such activities were related to holy or religious ceremonies, contests were between girls of noble heritage, and only unmarried female virgins could participate. An illustration of Atalanta, a female wrestler from Greek mythology, is featured on a vase decoration from the fifth or sixth century BC; she is shown grappling with Peleus (Kent).

Wrestling developed in several forms around the world, and different countries have their own distinct styles. Both Greco–Roman and freestyle have been dominant in Europe, whereas freestyle is the most common form in the U.S. Among the many styles throughout Asia, sumo is the oldest form and is still very popular (Sisjord, 2001). During the twentieth century, bouts were organized

professionally and took place in circuses, traveling booths, pubs, and working-class gyms. Most participants were men, but women were also allowed to perform. Between the two World Wars, female wrestlers became very popular in several countries, and crowds came to watch the novelty. The matches were gimmicks, perceived as “unrespectable,” and the female wrestlers were on the margins of society (Hargreaves, 1994).

Wrestling as a “respectable sport,” organized by the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA), has grown during the last century for men and during the last few decades for women and girls. In the 1970s, female wrestling was largely practiced in European countries such as France, Belgium, and Norway, but during the 1980s, the sport began to develop on other continents (Gundersen, 1996). Female wrestling was included in the Olympic Games in 2004, but male wrestling has been on the program since the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 (Hargreaves, 1994).

Wrestling in Norway is an amateur sport; professional wrestling is nonexistent. Professional wrestling is rarely shown, if at all, on TV networks, but it is accessible on pay-per-view. The credibility of wrestling is further undermined by the popularity of so-called “professional wrestling” in the U.S., which, according to Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000), is a “sport as theatre” form of entertainment (p. 391). Professional wrestling is a choreographed event in which men are “real men” and “women are present as sexy support objects for the men who wage violent, monumental ‘wars’ against each other. Winners bravely display muscular strength, speed, power, and guts. Bodily harm is (supposedly) intentionally inflicted on opponents” (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, p. 391).

Compared with other sports in Norway, wrestling is a relatively small sport in terms of the number of participants. Membership in the Norwegian Wrestling Federation (NWF) is about 6,000. In contrast, the soccer federation, the largest sport-participant organization, has about 376,000 members (Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sport, 2006). Female wrestlers comprise one fourth of the wrestling members of NWF. Membership has increased about 20% during the past 5 years (Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sport, 2001, 2006), with slightly more males than females becoming members. The large membership might reflect the wrestling federation’s efforts to develop wrestling programs for youngsters and educate coaches (personal telephone conversation with the president of the Norwegian Wrestling). In terms of wrestling style in Norway, males wrestle according to the Greco-Roman rules, whereas females wrestle according to freestyle rules. Often, women and men practice together in their clubs. This means that in order to practice, a woman has to wrestle with a man in situations when few women are present, and she gets a sparring partner who is not trained in freestyle wrestling (Sisjord, 1997).

## **Hegemonic Masculinity and Media Constructions**

Basic to hegemonic theory is the premise that the main source for creating and perpetuating ideological hegemony is the dominant class. The means by which the dominant class accomplishes this is by extending their material control to the cultural sectors. Because the dominant class controls the economic and political

institutions, it tends to have privileged access to the major institutions such as sport and mass media (Sage, 1990). Sport and mass media are inextricably linked in a symbiotic relationship, and one of the most relevant hegemonic activities within sport and the mass media is directly related to gender (Pedersen, 2002). Predominant themes in sports media reinforce the hegemony of current race and gender relations in a process characterized by continuity. However, there are also some identifiable discontinuities (Messner, 2002).

Inspired by hegemonic theory, Connell (1987, 1995) used patterns of power relations to explain the current hierarchical gender order. Hegemonic masculinity is the definition of masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations; it is at the top of the gender hierarchy, superior to subordinated masculinities and femininities. Hegemonic masculinity is a practice that contributes to the gendered division of labor and is associated with heterosexuality, authority, strength, courage, and physical toughness. Sport is commonly used by Connell in discussions of hegemonic masculinity in which physical strength and power are major components. On the other hand, “emphasized femininity” is the complementary femininity oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men. There are subordinated femininities that reject the emphasized femininity but remain “invisible” because of the overwhelming attention devoted to maintaining emphasized femininity as the conventional norm in society.

Despite the power and resources available to dominant groups, hegemony always has elements of uncertainty and a changing balance, and ideological contradictions render it vulnerable to oppositional tendencies and cultural change (Sage, 1990). To this end, hegemonic masculinity must not be understood as a fixed character type because the position is always contestable, carried out in a dynamic process with resistance and counter-hegemonic strategies at work.

The media present hegemonic ideology in sport, and televised sport is labeled a “quintessentially masculine genre” by Rose and Friedman (1997, p. 2). They claim that the commentaries explicitly address the male viewer—or the viewer as male—and that “television sports may similarly be read as the representation of moral and ideological conflicts around *masculine* identity and social roles” (Rose & Friedman, p. 8). This reinforces the patriarchal power structure, and, consequently, the dominant class is given the ability to define the discussion, excluding alternative worldviews and values. Media representations of sport naturalize hegemonic masculinity when they depict its features as conventional or acceptable and depict alternatives to it as unconventional or deviant (e.g., Trujillo, 2000; Wernick, 1987; Whitson, 1990).

Media representations of women’s sport still remain marginal (Baker & Boyd, 1997), and the underrepresentation of female athletes is well documented in studies involving newspapers (Crolley & Teso, 2007; Crossman, Hyslop, & Gutrie, 1994; King, 2007; Pirinen, 1997), the tabloid press (Harris & Clayton, 2002), newspaper photographs (Pedersen, 2002), and TV news (Shifflett & Revelle, 1994). Exceptions are studies of Olympic Games media coverage in which content analysis found no significant gender differences (Capranica & Aversa, 2002; Capranica, Minganti, Billat, et al., 2005; Vincent, Imwold, Masemann, & Johnson, 2002). Even though sportswomen have gained widespread social acceptance, part of the media coverage reflects “feminized” images, which reinforces traditional and stereotypical femininity; as such they are simply new variations of

“media images as a product or tool of patriarchal oppression of women—and their bodies—through an institutionalized socially constructed system of gender roles and values.” (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994, pp. 28–29). Messner (2002) also points out that the “humorous sexualization” of female athletes reflects a framing that supports the gender-appropriate ranking scheme in sport. The appropriate sports are those not challenging the traditional gender-role expectations.

Contact sports such as wrestling are seen as sports that reinforce desirable masculine practices (Sisjord, 1997; Wachs & Dworkin, 1997; Whitson, 1990). According to Creedon (1994), muscles can be “feminine” and “unfeminine.” Female athletes who participate in sports associated with unfeminine muscularity and strength are often represented as aberrant and freakish (Holmlund, 1997). More dramatic, these female athletes are silenced or not taken seriously even though women have participated in both boxing and wrestling for several decades. Oates (1987) commented on the reasons for this:

... in any case, raw aggression is thought to be the peculiar province of men, as nurturing is the peculiar province of women. The female boxer violates this stereotype and cannot be taken seriously—she is a parody, she is a cartoon, she is monstrous. (p. 73)

Through analysis of Fox Network television shows featuring girls wrestling boys, Walton (2007) explains how the media works to undermine subversion of hegemonic masculinity when female wrestlers are superior to their male competitors on the mat. By associating these contests with “rasslin” rather than a “real” sport, the reputation of wrestling is not tarnished. In addition, these types of matches are portrayed in fictional accounts that downplay the seriousness of the rule-less “matches” virtually made for shows.

Corresponding observations from popular culture illustrate that TV and mainstream films have made characters such as Xena, Buffy, and Nikita popular together with heroines in *Alias* (Sydney), *Tomb Raider* (Lara Croft), *Kill Bill*, and *Charlie's Angels*. These heroines share some common traits; they can literally “kick ass” and exhibit visible signs of muscles on a trained body. More important, they maintain the traditional signs of femininity and beauty and dress up when the situation requires (Tung, 2004).

Holmlund (1997) argues that men are threatened by the abolition of visible gender differences, that strong and muscular women often disrupt the equation of men with strength and women with weakness that are familiar gender roles and power relationships between men and women. Yet, when strong female athletes are depicted in the media, they are often “trivialized” into princesses, mothers, beauty queens, and their athletic achievements are undermined by the type of coverage they receive (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994). As a result, one might expect that the media would promote female wrestling if they found the wrestlers appealing as feminine role models, because female athletes get attention when nationalism or high profit potential (usually as heterosexual attractiveness) can be evoked (Messner, 2002). However, as pointed out by Heywood and Dworkin (2003), a shift in ideals about gender roles and body shapes is occurring, which is revealed in ad campaigns, movies, and female athletes’ experiences of their bodies and athletic performances. The authors suggest that contemporary gender codes

cannot be as easily polarized as has been the case previously because of extending repertoires of femininities and masculinities. Using the theoretical concepts outlined here and the extant research, this study aimed to explore female and male wrestlers' perceptions of media representations and how that relates to their perceptions of their roles as athletes and to their own gender construction.

## Methods

The empirical investigation was conducted in the fall of 2005 using qualitative, in-depth, semistructured interviews. Participants in the study were eight elite wrestlers on the Norwegian national team. Four were senior athletes with years of international experience; four were junior athletes at the national level. There were four women and four men (two seniors and two juniors of each gender) and the interviewees ranged in age from 17 to 33. The junior wrestlers still attended high school, but senior men and women differed in terms of higher education and occupations. The senior female wrestlers had academic degrees and were in professional careers, whereas the senior male wrestlers were simply "wrestlers" living on scholarships and part-time jobs. Among the interviewees, seven out of eight had fathers or other family members who were or had been wrestlers, which reflects the term "wrestling families"—a common expression among wrestlers.

In our study, both authors had formerly done research on wrestling and had contacts in the wrestling community. We were able to recruit wrestlers with the help of an influential coach. The athletes were informed about the purpose of the study and of the voluntary nature of participation. We found that being familiar with the wrestling milieu, terminology, and the team was an advantage. The interviews, which were conducted by the two authors during a training camp, lasted from one to one-and-a-half hours, and were tape-recorded.

The topics covered in the interviews were personal background, sport biography, experiences with media coverage in general, the athletes' perceptions of media constructions, and how the latter corresponded with the athletes' self-perceptions. The criteria of quality of an interview given by Kvale (1997) and Patton (1990) were taken into consideration when planning, conducting, transcribing, and analyzing the material. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded with main categories and associated subcategories (Strauss, 1996), and cross-case analyzed (Patton, 1990). Both researchers coded the raw material in main categories guided by topics from the interview guide and elaborated subcategories. At the first coding, the authors had about 60–70% agreement; the remaining cases were discussed and agreed upon before the final coding. Finally, the wrestlers were sent a copy of the study, and all consented to the content.

## Results and Discussion

In general, media coverage of wrestling in Norway is very limited. Wrestling is a minor sport, and the sport media primarily devote space to more popular sports such as soccer and the ski disciplines, which are covered extensively (Gilberg, 1996). A national newspaper database (national and local newspapers) shows that over a 5-year span (August 2002–August 2007), 875 wrestling reports had been

recorded, whereas soccer had been reported 115,383 times and the various ski-disciplines together totaled 50,345 reports (Retriever Info Service, 2007).

Wrestling's marginal position in the sport media was reflected in this study. When asking the wrestlers about media coverage, the most common and spontaneous response was a resigned laugh—and then, “there is none,” or “The lack of coverage is almost embarrassing, taking into account the performance level and number of medals Norwegian wrestlers gain in international contests.” The latter relates to the competitiveness that characterizes organized sport and cultivation of the ethos of winning as supreme (Sage, 1990). That ethos has been internalized by the athletes. Furthermore, integral to the emphasis on winning, is publicity and media attention, which the wrestlers seemingly desire to the fullest extent possible.

When the wrestlers further elaborated on media coverage, it was evident that all interviewees had personal experiences and perceptions of the way wrestling is featured in the media that, in many cases, the wrestlers considered to be an inaccurate representation of events and athletes. As suggested by Jarvie (2006), at least two main filters of selection operate in translating sport into a media product. The first filter is that of general news or audience value. The second filter consists of rules of presentation that are picked up from the codes of theater performance and the discourses of popular culture, such as story-telling, dramas, personification, archetypical narratives, and actions with symbolic overtones and reporting rituals. Applied to the current study, the selection rate seemed to be relatively low, although apparently higher in the local press than in the national press, and focused on different topics. These points will be covered more fully in the next section. Further, the selection filter relates to topics or events chosen for presentation, as well as to how these topics are presented to the public. To this end, four main topics emerged from the data that will guide the discussion. First, general presentations of local press versus national press; second, the focus on what the media covers as sensational and scandalous; third, we will elaborate on gender stereotyping; and finally, we will discuss whether wrestlers are presented as serious athletes or media clowns.

## **Local Press Versus National Press and TV Coverage of Wrestling**

The results indicate that the athletes make a distinction between local and national press and television coverage of wrestling. Based on the interview data, it seems reasonable to conclude that the local print media represented the merits of both females and males equally, more so than the national press. The findings indicate different filters operating; the national press tends to disregard female wrestlers' merits to a greater degree than the local press. Several of the interviewees emphasized the benefits of the local press's interest in wrestling in relation to publicity and the recruitment of athletes. In smaller towns, when wrestlers from the local club have performed well nationally and internationally, media coverage seemed to be quite common. This is particularly true when wrestling is a popular sport in the town, as this quotation from a female wrestler illustrates:

In my town, it's quite common to do wrestling. There are not so many choices when it comes to sport; it's a small town, you know. And wrestling has grown due to the success of wrestlers and the interest people take in the sport. And the local press has been helpful by covering the events; national, local and international competition.

The local print media was therefore regarded by the wrestlers as being focused on their athletic achievements. A few of them praised the local journalists' insight into wrestling, which they rarely observed elsewhere in the media sphere. One of the wrestlers also expressed gratitude for the local newspaper's interest in the sport and his athletic career, because the newspaper sponsored him. The latter situation relates particularly to a few small towns in west and northern Norway, where wrestling is as popular as soccer. Consequently, the wrestlers received appropriate media attention. But for most of the wrestlers in the rest of the country, the lack of media attention could have financial consequences because it affects the wrestlers' ability to procure sponsorships. As one wrestler put it, "To get sponsors you need to have a known name, so getting so little publicity is clearly a disadvantage."

In contrast to the local print media's coverage of wrestling, the interviewees complained about the lack of interest in wrestling in the national print media and on television "irrespective of achievements," and this facet was mentioned several times. Both sexes reported that the national media were not interested in their sport, and both sexes felt this was unfair when comparing media coverage received by other sports. Although wrestling is a marginal sport in terms of membership, the Norwegian wrestlers have performed well in international competitions over many years, so wrestling "should get its share," as it was expressed. However, as one of them said, "It's probably difficult for the big newspapers and TV channels to cover something they don't know anything about and take no interest in." Even when a wrestler wins a medal in the World Championship, the national newspapers are likely to devote only a small paragraph to this achievement. As indicated earlier, wrestling is rarely covered by national TV with the following exceptions: medal-earning performances by Norwegian wrestlers at the Olympics (when wrestlers win medals that add to the total number of Norwegian medals) and in major international events such as the World Championship.

The gender aspect is striking: Women clearly receive less publicity than do men, which is a general phenomenon across the sporting world (Crossman, Hyslop, & Gutrie, 1994; Duncan & Messner, 1998; Harris & Clayton, 2002; Pedersen, 2002; Shifflett & Revelle, 1994). Both female and male wrestlers admitted that the women's share of press coverage was almost zero, in particular in the national press/TV, although their successes have certainly deserved attention. This was a commonly held viewpoint among the wrestlers. As one would expect, female wrestlers did not make the headlines when participating in the World Championships. However, one particular story was mentioned by female, as well as male, wrestlers. When a highly successful female wrestler took part in the World Championship, the media primarily paid attention to the junior male wrestler who functioned as her sparring partner before and during the event. Neither wrestler was comfortable with the angle of the story, so the article led to



discussions among the wrestlers concerning the biased gender representation in the media. One male wrestler remarked:

If I had accomplished something similar to her (female wrestler, several times World Champion), I guess I would have been a mega-star here in Norway. The media has much more respect for a male world champ than a female.

This wrestler indicates admiration for the female wrestler's accomplishments, which he assumes would be much more celebrated if the wrestler had been a male. This finding may be explained in terms of the media's attention to audience building and the mechanisms through which an "audience preference" is socially constructed for men's and women's sport (Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). One typical justification for less media coverage of women's sports relates to "supply and demand" based on the assumption that the sport audience is composed mostly of men who show little interest in women's sports. Therefore, media producers simply devote more time and resources to men's sports (Duncan & Messner, 1998).

### **What do the Media Cover? Sensations and Scandals!**

In reading or viewing media constructions, the wrestlers decoded messages that may operate from one of three positions—*dominant-hegemonic*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional* (Hall, 1992). These positions reflect different ways the reader or viewer can read and decode the media message, which in the present case relates to the wrestler's recognition and negotiation of the media constructions of themselves as athletes.

The interviewees in this study expressed dislike for the media's distorted versions of "their" stories. The wrestlers explained that by focusing on "weird" topics, the media distracted attention from the real issue: their wrestling achievements. Their experiences are supported by research. Jarvie (2006) has pointed out that the visual presentations of sport are not neutral in that texts and images are organized to tell a particular story. The logic of selection and presentation of sport media coverage affects who and what gets center stage, and among the few commentaries wrestling has received, much attention was paid to what journalists found to be worthy of publicity, whereas the wrestlers found such highlights rather hurtful. For example, one wrestler commented:

Journalists often focus on the weird aspects of the sport: weight control and our ears. They are not interested in the results and how well you may have wrestled during the competition. You end up feeling that they try to paint a negative picture of the sport by focusing upon the scandals instead of the results. Or they want to debate whether it's a healthy sport or not.

The wrestlers questioned the public interest in the so-called "cauliflower ear," which is a common consequence of long-term wrestling. They often felt framed as "weird" people involved in a "sick" sport; as if they "should enjoy getting beaten and getting deformed ears." It should be mentioned that "cauliflower ear" is part of the wrestling discourse. A male wrestler said that he would have his ears

fixed when he finished his career. But the wrestlers perceived cauliflower ear merely as “a part of the game,” beyond public interest.

Likewise, wrestlers were surprised by the media coverage of weight control and weight-reducing strategies. For them, this constituted a natural part of preparing for major championships. The wrestlers expressed weight reduction in terms of self-discipline, eating routines, and healthy nutrition rather than dieting. They expressed that it was “just a part of the sport, takes only a week,” “it’s not a problem,” or “we don’t really discuss it.” However, the use of weight-reducing strategies is closely connected to eating disorders, which are widely debated in sport, as well as by the public, and may have implications beyond solely preparatory regimes that the wrestlers undergo to reach the required weight for a contest. The wrestlers’ own involvement in weight reduction appeared, however, to be double-edged, because their narratives also revealed an interest in the weight and body appearance of peer athletes, even though they claimed it was never discussed inside the group. During the interviews, “scandals” and weird topics were extended with examples of doping as a hot issue for the media. As one male interviewee said: “If someone should be accused of doping, that really gives a rise to headlines, and they never forget it.” However, the sport media’s interest in doping seems reasonable as an integral part of the general sport debate, and it is a highly prioritized issue within the sport governing bodies.

The issues highlighted above contradict the athletes’ own perceptions of the sport, particularly when the links to health are questioned. The interviewees were concerned with the positive sides of the sport, advocating the wholesome physical and mental exercise. The wrestlers clearly welcomed such topics to replace the sensations that the media commonly find to be better stories. Nevertheless, because of the media’s narrow focus, these stories never made the headlines, or, as one interviewee stated, “Journalists simply don’t bother about getting the slightest insight.” The wrestlers often experienced journalists as uninformed and not interested to learn. As one wrestler said, “They just want a sensation to write about and fill up the sports pages.” The results indicated that the wrestlers’ decoding of the media representations operate from an oppositional position (Hall, 1992), and the narratives reflect indignation concerning filters employed by the media in storytelling.

## Gender Stereotyping

The interviewees’ descriptions of media constructions reflected traditional perceptions of masculinity and femininity encompassing multiple dimensions—the wrestlers’ own constructions of gender, perceptions of the sport itself, and how media constructions were gendered. One facet of this relates to wrestling roles, how the media operates in emphasizing or questioning gender appropriate behavior, and how these depictions corresponded to the athletes’ self-perceptions. Both female and male wrestlers spoke in terms of grappling qualifications and desirable qualities, such as strength and flexibility. In addition, toughness, the fighting aspect, and metaphors such as “sport is war,” were commonly expressed by the males. One man was particularly excited when he referred to a media representation after a championship: “The final had everything you can get, a great cut,

blood flowing from my face, people got really crazy. Big picture on the front page and major headlines.”

The wrestler seems to be expressing a sense of pride that relates to his self-perception of being a fighter. In addition, he also expresses pride in the “show” he gave the audience, described as the “sports manhood formula” by Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000). Themes such as aggression, violence, and commercialism are central ingredients in the “sports manhood formula,” which Messner and colleagues explain as “a master ideological narrative that is well suited to discipline boys’ bodies, minds, and consumption choices in ways that construct a masculinity that is consistent with the entrenched interests of the sport/media/commercial complex.” (p. 380). The wrestler’s own expressions reflected terminology that sports commentators consistently use during sports events, as reported in the study by Messner and colleagues, such as martial metaphors.

The quotation also indicates that the wrestler took the dominant hegemonic position in decoding the media message. According to Hall (1992), this happens when the message is decoded in terms of the reference code within which it has been encoded. Based on the participant’s description, one might suggest the filters of drama and archetypal narratives of gender stereotyping (Jarvie, 2006) were at play in this particular representation. It is worthy to note, however, that the wrestler’s multiple roles—as media subject, interpreter, and storyteller—all seemingly operated within the same code of media construction.

Female wrestlers’ strength and wrestling performances were apparently depicted quite differently. The senior female wrestlers in the current study expressed disappointment in the way they often were approached by journalists, who seemingly paid more attention to body size and muscularity than to wrestling performance. As one female wrestler put it:

They are most concerned with weight training, strength, and that kind of stuff, much more than how we wrestle. Kind of, whether we just are some tough tomboys or if we are girls who are doing a serious sport.

The quotation corresponds to previous research reporting that sport media texts tend to marginalize and trivialize the achievements of sportswomen by downplaying their athletic merits (Creedon, 1998; Duncan, 1990; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Pirinen, 1997; Vincent, Pedersen, Whisenant, & Massey, 2007; von der Lippe, 2002). In this particular case, preference was given to “tomboy” labeling instead of athletic performance, which parallels common reactions to women’s transgression of traditional comprehensions of sports. In particular, women performing confrontational sports can be agents of resistance to hegemonic masculinity and challenge the gender order by offering an active, female physicality (Hargreaves, 1994).

In terms of receiving attention, beauty might be considered a requirement for female wrestlers, but not for men. Or as Billie Jean King expressed it: “Sure, the good-looking guys get more endorsements, but the difference in men’s sports is that the ugly ones get their share, too” (Messner, 2002, p. 100). Those old enough to remember talked about a period several years ago when the national press actually came to competitions and covered female wrestling. One of the female wrestlers spoke a lot about a former wrestler who was 1.80 cm tall, wrestled in the 70

kg class, had blond hair, and “almost looked like a model.” She was trained, but did not have an extremely muscular body.

Wherever we came, she got her photo taken—and we got some extra attention because of her. She got this media attention because she was beautiful. Athletes like her can do a lot for the sport.

The conclusion of this story is rather interesting—female wrestlers realized that only pretty and cute female wrestlers are filtered through for media representation, which associates to the “babe factor” in sports, that is, the marketing of female athletes according to their physical appearance rather than their athletic performance (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). A couple of the interviewees found it irritating and unworthy of comment, however, because they considered themselves to be serious athletes and wanted to be valued for their performances as wrestlers. The female wrestlers obviously disliked this situation, yet nevertheless have had to cope with the fact that emphasized femininity is integral to the gendered sport formula (Harris & Clayton, 2002).

As far as media images of sportswomen, these primarily include “symbols of sportswomen’s femininity (and particularly images that are saturated with sexuality) rather than pictures of female athleticism” (Hargreaves, 1993, p. 62). Discussions with the female participants about photo sessions were double-edged, because sexualization of female athletes may result in more attention to women’s sport, but it simultaneously betrays the benefits sport has to offer female athletes (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003).

Another issue that emerged from the data related to photographs relates to images of active versus still and posed female athletes. Still photography, or the “frozen in time” moment, is usually a form of communication that can capture epic moments of sport (Rowe, 2004). Previous research highlighted men as being portrayed more frequently in active positions whereas women are more frequently portrayed in passive positions (Duncan, 1990; Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Wilhelmi, 2006). The present study shows that both sexes reported that the media was interested in still photographs, yet with a different framing. When having their photographs taken, the male wrestlers were often asked to pose stripped to the waist, to show their muscular upper bodies. One of them reflected:

Quite often we are asked to take the shirt off when taking photos. The media wants to show muscles and a trained body. I have refused when it is out of context: I am afraid of being taken for a thickheaded guy. Many people think that muscles and stupidity are closely connected.

According to Connell (2002), an understanding of embodiment and masculinity requires that we take into account that bodies are both objects and agents of social practice. The comments of the previous wrestler reflect self-staging versus objectification, uncovering these two dimensions. The first relates to muscles and a trained body giving evidence for “megarexia”—the bigger, the better—a term that White, Young, and Gillett (1995) connect to the increased popularity of different kinds of body-building exercises, which White et al. explain as a function of the changing masculine identity in contemporary society. The presentation of the (male) muscular body as natural and desirable is rooted in an ideology of

gender differences, championing dominant meanings of masculinity through the literal embodiment of patriarchal power (White & Gillett, 1994).

The second dimension relates to the association between muscles and stupidity, which the wrestler feared might have negative implications for how others perceived him as a person. A similar issue was raised by Wacquant (1995) in his study of boxing with reference to the stereotypical images conveyed by the mass media or aestheticized depictions of novelists, which he characterized as stubborn attacks and sometimes vitriolic criticism. The wrestler's perception of connections between strength and stupidity might also have encroached on his sense of masculinity. As Connell (1995) points out, strength and physicality are closely connected to hegemonic masculinity. Rationality, however, is also a part of hegemonic masculinity. The media construction of the wrestler that emphasized his body appearance might have detracted from his apparent rationality and represented him as a shallow thinker.

The same wrestler expressed a sort of unease when meeting new people, because he felt the media stereotyped him as someone he, himself, did not recognize. His comment about being perceived as "thickheaded" contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements and can be understood in terms of decoding the message from within the negotiated version. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of the event while simultaneously reserving the right to "negotiat[e] application to 'local conditions,' to its own more *corporate* position" (Hall, 1992, p. 137, emphasis in original).

A woman's voice might here serve as an illustration of the masculinity-femininity stereotyping of the athletes in relation to her wins at the World Championships:

You know, the winner of the [women's] World Championship receives tiaras—which actually speaks for itself. The guys get a belt when they win. The prize pictures of me presented in the media have all been from the victory podium with these tiaras.

The signs of honor illustrated in the quotation—a belt versus a tiara—convey stereotyping by attaching feminine and masculine symbols to women's and men's athletic achievements. This wrestler's complaint was twofold, reflecting the gender regime in wrestling, as well as the media's employment of filters (Jarvie, 2006). First, the expression "which actually speaks for itself" indicated disapproval of the organizers' evaluation of female wrestling by giving tiaras to the prize winners, which can be interpreted in terms of resistance toward the sport organization and culture. Secondly, it revealed dissatisfaction with the media's framing of her wrestling merits by using this particular image. Elsewhere in the interview, she commented that male champions more commonly were portrayed in "combat" situations. The representation of the female wrestler in a passive position—with a tiara—exemplifies emphasized femininity as a cultural construction that, according to Connell (1987), is commonly promoted in the mass media and marketing.

## Are Wrestlers Serious Athletes or Media Clowns?

The interview data revealed several peculiar aspects that colored media constructions of wrestling, some related to wrestling situations, others to contexts outside wrestling. The female wrestlers claimed several times that the media presented woman wrestlers as strange and queer figures, and they talked a lot about what they had to do in photographs, which they obviously found unpleasant:

I always have to lift somebody (usually a man) when I have my photo taken. They (the journalists) want to focus on how strong we are. But why must I always look like a troll (refers to a myth figure from the fairy tales, often featured as a monster) and lift somebody?

Another said: "It is stupid that we always have to lift somebody; wrestling is so much more. We are strong, but not that strong." These comments are striking examples of how female athletes may be held up to ridicule and how the media chooses to make them interesting because of their "weirdness" or clown aspect rather than by focusing on their wrestling skills. As noted by Heywood and Dworin (2003), bodies (muscular or not) can and are coded as vulnerable in relation to heterosexual polarization. The female wrestlers demonstrate codes of masculinity and femininity simultaneously that, in terms of media framing, can be interpreted as a combination of humorous and condescending representations, detracting from the wrestlers' self-images and their self-presentation as serious athletes.

Other narratives from the female interviewees focused on sparring partners: "A few years ago, I trained with a 30-year-old retired football player. This became a story. Both the radio, local press covered the story several times." Consequently, the focus was moved from the wrestler to the sparring partner, whose main task was to assist the wrestler in preparing for contests. This, as argued earlier, may be explained in terms of trivializing the female athlete by undermining her achievements (Creedon, 1998; Duncan, 1990; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Pirinen, 1997). The story also relates to Walton's study (2007) of television shows in which girls wrestled boys, where the social meaning and framing of female athletes threatens to subvert the counter-hegemonic potential posed by women athletes.

The present study also provided evidence of (male) wrestlers invited to participate in entertainment programs, possibly jeopardizing the seriousness of the sport. Recently, all four male wrestlers had had some kind of national TV "performances." However, these performances did not deal with them as serious athletes but as "stuntmen" invited to display physical strength or to wrestle with celebrities. Positive publicity may have resulted, but the framing of the presentation is judged by whether it benefits or harms the athletes and the sport. The wrestlers expressed dual perceptions in that regard. Although they enjoyed the stunts and publicity, they nevertheless realized the potential long-term effects might be damage to the sport or their personal reputations. Some of them were reminded of the negative affect of taking the "show-role" at the risk of being considered "a clown."

The results show that both female and male wrestlers were portrayed as media clowns in converging and diverging ways. In essence, the women's narratives referred to media representations in connection with wrestling competition, the males' to entertainment programs and shows. Hence, the framing of female wrestlers resulted in raillery and disdain for their roles as athletes, whereas the framing of male wrestlers extended and transformed their image of "strong macho man" into entertainment contexts. Filters were employed to downplay the "normal" aspects of the sport while highlighting humorous and entertainment-related content, as well as emphasizing hegemonic masculinity.

The wrestlers' concerns of being portrayed as anomalies and ridiculous athletes bring to mind professional wrestling, which is produced solely for entertainment. As mentioned earlier, this form of wrestling is distinctively different from other televised sporting events. There are no clear rules or codes of behavior. "Violence" is permissible to meet the goal of brutally defeating the opponent (Lemish, 1998), and the audiences actively contribute to the show through verbal and physical expressions of support and excitement (Fiske, 1987). The elements of wrestling as theater rather than a sporting event are emphasized by Barthes (1972) in his semiotic analysis of professional wrestling. Barthes points to the elements of entertainment, communication with the audience, and the bodily expressions relating to dramas complete with pain, defeat, and justice. Barthes draws a parallel between professional wrestling and the art of "pantomime," with the wrestling body as the main tool and the key element in presenting and understanding the message.

One might hypothesize that professional wrestling as a televised spectacle blurs and influences common perceptions of wrestling that can negatively affect nonprofessional (FILA) wrestling. As a consequence, media framing and the quest for excitement, entertainment, violence, and brutality could influence media representations of amateur wrestling. Although professional wrestling in Norway is nonexistent, TV producers could stage amateur wrestling matches with the purpose of producing professional-wrestling style entertainment.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore how female and male wrestlers experienced the ways they and their sport were presented by the media. The wrestlers' experiences with media coverage clearly showed that "the media do not simply report news; they actively construct it by *framing* it: that is, by offering a context for viewing or understanding an event" (Duncan & Messner, 1998, p. 173, emphasis in original). In the current study, hegemonic masculinity is reflected by the media in the way male and female wrestlers are framed. It is conveyed by the way messages are filtered for the public to read and view. One filter relates to which stories are presented and how they are selected. Although female and male Norwegian wrestlers have achieved success both nationally and internationally, they have received scant attention from the media, with females receiving less than males. The findings also indicated distinctions between the local versus the national print press and TV in media coverage.

A second filter, consisting of the rules of presentation originating in codes of theater performance and the discourses of popular culture (Jarvie, 2006), apparently was at work in the media constructions of the wrestlers as well. Participants

in the study perceived themselves as serious, high-performing athletes strongly dedicated to wrestling. Nevertheless, they have had to cope with distorted accounts of their sport and themselves in the media. Filters reflecting archetypical narratives in terms of gender stereotyping dwell on the male wrestlers' body. Female wrestlers are shown only when displaying appropriate codes of femininity or transgressing traditional gender norms, thereby provoking disdain. The media constructions affect the male and female wrestlers' perceptions of their gender in different ways, mainly by supporting men's gender self-constructions and contradicting women's.

The wrestlers' recognized that media coverage was characterized by sensationalism and scandals, such as cauliflower ears, weight-control strategies, and doping. Furthermore, using a process of filtering, the media constructed the wrestlers as "clowns" in order to provide entertainment: men by extending their "macho" athlete role to contexts *outside* the wrestling environment, and women by framing and holding them up for ridicule *inside* the sport context. It goes without saying that the media representations of wrestlers as media clowns strongly contradicted their self-perceptions as athletes, more so for females than males.

Although the wrestlers might dislike the media representations, they are not in a position to resist or change the images the media conveys. Their reactions are limited to evaluations on an individual level in terms of decoding media messages, from which, according to Hall (1992), they can operate from three positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. Male wrestlers decoded the media's gendered representations from a dominant-hegemonic or negotiated position. In contrast, female wrestlers' decoding was from the oppositional position. As far as sensations and scandals, decoding by all wrestlers was mainly oppositional. The media-clown construction was decoded from the oppositional position by the women, whereas men's decoding operated both from an oppositional and negotiated position. Consequently, the findings in the current study raise questions about whether and how the media representations influence the wrestlers' own gender constructions and self-perceptions, an issue to be followed up in future research.

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