

Annika Sorenstam

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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Annika Sorenstam
JUNE 16, 2005

There is a philosophical puzzle that poses the question, if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a noise? Although it is not quite the same thing, that line did come to mind last weekend as Annika Sorenstam waltzed to victory in the second major of the year. In fact, Sorenstam has been waltzing all over everybody, everything, and everywhere in the last few years on the LPGA tour. Over the past few months, she has been torrid, and last weekend she moved halfway towards her goal of winning the grand slam this season.

This was her ninth major title, the sixty-second victory of her career, and with Saturday's round of 69, Sorenstam tied the record for consecutive rounds under 70 at fourteen. She has won five of her last seven LPGA events. It is as blistering a performance as anyone has ever turned in on the links.

Yet, when the television ratings are tallied the LPGA events and Sorenstam's performances draw very small numbers. This, coupled with the fact that she labors in a woman's sport, proves to many in our pop world that there is little significance to what Annika is doing.

Do people need to be watching for a significant sports event to take place? Most certainly not. Must there be some threshold of interest for a sports achievement to be deemed significant? Some seem to think so.

I remember very well in the 1980s when Michelle Akers was playing soccer at the University of Central Florida. On the occasions that I was able to go out and see her play, I would simply walk over to the field, station myself on the sidelines of the soccer pitch, and along with perhaps thirty to forty others watch the world's greatest female soccer player.

I remember thinking at one point what a shame it was that so few people were in attendance. Didn't they know that this great player was on the campus? As I reflected on this seeming dichotomy, I realized that whether or not anyone was present was of little significance. Michelle Akers' performance was not impacted by attendance. She performed at a world class level on every occasion no matter who was in attendance. Akers was a

world-class athlete whether or not anyone was watching, and she was a wonder to behold. If you saw her, you knew immediately what you were seeing, and you were likely never to forget it.

Similarly, in the madness of the World Football League experiment, the New Jersey Generals were using our campus as a practice facility. Again, you could wander out there to watch the workouts, and after the initial buzz over Herschel Walker's arrival, there were very few people there. When the games began, that often remained true. Did that change Walkers' performance? I don't think so. When you saw Herschel Walker, you knew you were seeing a world class athlete and like Akers it did not depend on spectators for its significance. The spectator is within the essence of sport. The performance of the athlete is all that really matters.

The other variable in our gender driven world is that Sorenstam is not a great beauty. She has little sex appeal and is unlikely to appear on a web site in provocative poses. In our contemporary sports' world, in which men still dominate the sports departments of the media, print and electronic, sexist perspectives still dominate.

Look at the reporting of last weekend. The woman who received the lion's share of the coverage and whose name seemed everywhere was not Annika Sorenstam, but rather Dannica Patrick. The woman that was dominating golf and setting records of an unprecedented character, who was in the middle of a quest for a grand slam did receive some coverage, but not all that much, and little compared with Patrick. Sports editors will tell you that coverage of Sorenstam's quest is limited by the fact that there is little interest in the LPGA not by any other factors.

At the same time, Patrick seemed omnipresent. ESPN was touting their coverage of some Indy Car event in Texas that few knew existed before last Monday, and fewer cared about. Patrick has not won a race on the Indy circuit, her best finish is fourth, yet she is interviewed and profiled with incessant abandon. Dannica has what sometimes seems the only thing that male sportswriters care about in women's sport, sex appeal. She is attractive, she is articulate, and therefore she is worthy of coverage.

If these standards were applied to men's sport there would be few golfers, very few baseball players, or very few men from any sport who would get much coverage. Most of them, as Muhammad Ali would have said, are not pretty. But in men's sport, pretty and

sexy are not all that important. These qualities are a bonus for the likes of Derek Jeter or Tony Parker, but not the primary reason for them to be given blanket media coverage.

In women's sport, however, pretty and sexy are very much in demand and control the level of coverage for the female athlete. One can only imagine what the coverage of Annika Sorenstam would be if she looked like Jan Stephenson.

Does all this diminish Annika Sorenstam's achievements? No, it only diminishes the stature of those who report the games, and those who accept this sexist nonsense as normal in the world of sport in the early 21st century.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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