

PERSONAL BRANDS OF PROFESSIONAL AND  
COLLEGIATE FEMALE ATHLETES

by

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Countless factors can affect an athlete's career. Of these factors, personal branding is one of the only factors that an athlete can control in her career. Through interviews with 13 female student-athletes at the University of Oregon, this study examines the degree to which female student-athletes are influenced by the personal brands of professional female athletes. The qualitative data revealed that these student-athletes recognize the overall importance of having a personal brand for both athletic careers and non-athletic careers. The study participants voiced that they admire professional athletes with personal brands based on family, faith, community, and an overall positive attitude. However, some student-athletes did not feel like they received a completely genuine portrayal of these athletes' because their personal brands only present one surface of them. Interestingly, all student-athletes have trouble identifying the themes and strength of their own personal brands; some even doubt that they have a personal brand yet.

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## **Introduction**

Personal branding expert Tom Peters first popularized the idea of personal branding in his 1997 Fast Company article, “The Brand Called You.” Peters (1997) wrote, “The good news — and it is largely good news — is that everyone has a chance to stand out. Everyone has a chance to learn, improve, and build up their skills. Everyone has a chance to be a brand worthy of remark.”

Over the years, personal branding has become a hot topic given the invention of social media and technology that makes building a brand easy and accessible to almost everyone. The Web is an ideal place for personal branding, and social media is an especially valuable personal branding tool because it is free to use. Personal brands are well suited for people with celebrity status, like professional athletes. Professional athletes have the opportunity to build their personal brand in a way that will strengthen their athletic careers, as well as transfer to their post-athletic careers.

Because professional female athletes still earn significantly smaller salaries than their male counterparts, it is especially advantageous for them to utilize their personal brands as much as possible (Lieber, 2014). During years of athletic competition, female athletes can use their personal brands to gain sponsorships, and once their careers on the field, court, or track are over, they can use their personal brands to branch into new industries.

Professional athletes are most visible to collegiate athletes through social media platforms. Research is necessary to understand what student-athletes look for and learn from the professionals’ social media posts. It will also help to understand what student-

athletes admire about the professionals' personal brands on social media and if those aspects influence the student-athletes' personal brands.

Interviews with 13 student-athletes helped identify how the personal brands of professional female athletes influence collegiate female athletes, with the goal of identifying findings that might aid both parties. First, female collegiate athletes can learn the best ways to build their personal brands early in their careers. Personal branding based solely on athletic performance is risky because of the threat of unexpected injuries and unsatisfactory performances. A well-maintained personal brand will be beneficial for collegiate female athletes whether they decide to become a professional in their sport or in another career. Second, current professional female athletes can strengthen their personal brands and opportunities, as well as recognize their power of influence and learn how they can be role models for female athletes at all levels of competition.

## Background

Personal branding expert Peter Montoya (2003) defines your personal brand as “the powerful, clear, positive idea that comes to mind whenever other people think of you. It’s what you stand for—the values, abilities and actions that others associate with you.” A 2011 study analyzed the processes, challenges and implications of online personal branding. The research was mainly focused on Facebook profiles and concluded that branding is inevitable when users participate in an online environment. Fortunately, the Web has become well-suited for personal branding: “The creation of online personal Web sites and social media profiles have flourished as the Web 2.0 environment offers tools that simplify these processes and encourage user generated content” (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne 2011).

Peters (1997) wrote that personal branding is for everyone, and everyone has the power to be their own brand their own marketer. Labrecque et al.’s (2011) research further defined personal branding as a process composed of *brand identity*, *brand positioning* and *brand image*. Brand identity refers to how the marketer wants the brand to be perceived and “relies on self-presentation as identities are created in computer-mediated environments using social networking profiles, blogs and personal Web pages” (44). Brand positioning refers to the aspects of the brand identity that are actively and consistently communicated to the target audience: “Individuals use brand positioning to highlight their positive attributes that are of value to their target audience while at the same time differentiating themselves from other individuals in the marketplace.” Brand image is how the brand is perceived by the marketplace and “depends on information posted by the focal person, information posted by others, and

the marketplace reaction to the presented information which is generally based on visible behavior, nonverbal behavior, and other observable cues” (45).

Personal brands will always mean different things to different people. Aspects of personal brands, including motivation, design and execution, differ from everyday people to celebrities. For many people, gaining employment is usually a goal of personal branding. However, Labrecque et al.’s (2011) research concluded that this is not exclusive because “people self-brand for many social reasons including dating, establishing friendships or simply for self-expression” (39). Karaduman’s 2013 study researched the personal brands of the top-level executives of companies. The researchers discovered that the role of top-level executives has evolved through the reinvention of modern leadership:

“The role of top level executives has become more visible, social, connected and accessible than ever before. The competitive environment has likewise been transformed and customers, investors and stakeholders expect to have access to the insights and visions of brand leaders on a continuous basis.” (468)

Each leadership style is unique to each individual leader. Therefore, top-level executives must work to develop their personal brands publicly as a way to build relationships with those integral to the success of their companies. This study exemplifies how “with a well-planned brand management on social media, and with a high level of engagement, top level executives of companies may create value both themselves and the other brands of their company” (Karaduman, 2013).

Another level of personal branding is that of celebrities or people with celebrity status (for the purpose of this study, specifically professional athletes). It is no secret that some people look up to professional athletes and monitor almost everything they

do. Colapinto and Benecchi (2014) researched the personal brand of U.S. Olympic figure skater and 2010 gold medalist Evan Lysacek. The qualitative research analyzed Lysacek's social media and the management of his online reputation. As an Olympic athlete who was "both the face of a country and that of a company [through sponsorship]," Lysacek was described as "someone who developed into a brand, carefully constructing his persona around the values of fair play, commitment and integrity, and who presents himself as a role model in both personal and competitive life" (225). Unfortunately, Lysacek's reputation was compromised by a single offensive tweet regarding his response to a question about the sexuality of his rival, U.S. figure skater Johnny Weir. The research illustrated how a professional athlete is a marketable commodity and social media functions as a platform for self-presentation, where athletes must work to preserve their image.

Another study investigated the evolution of star status in professional team sports using data from the National Basketball Association (Yang & Shi, 2011). It used literature related to branding, brand alliances, product diffusion and sports marketing and economics to demonstrate that "star athletes as personal brands share similar properties with other brands associated with services, physical goods and movie stars" (5). It is important to understand this study in the context of male professional athletes. Results found that "unlike most product brands, which are managed through such marketing mix variables as advertising and pricing, professional athletes manage their brands by improving individual performance, choosing the right teams, and joining the right teammates" (28). Those are the three ways that professional male athletes manage

their personal brands; all three focused on athletic performance and primarily on-the-field behavior.

Another study investigated how female professional wake boarders build their personal brands to gain sponsorships (Parris, Trolio, Bouchet, & Welty Peachey, 2014).

Action sports earn less money than traditional professional team sports, so

“individuals who participate in action sports at the professional level must rely on sponsorships from a variety of companies to finance their careers. Thus, an entrepreneurial spirit is critical for these individuals, who are challenged to market themselves by building a personal brand to gain sponsorship.” (367)

Action sports are much different than traditional sports, but this study proves that female athletes in both types of sports must rely on personal branding efforts to make a comfortable living. Although sponsorship is not the only measurement of success of a personal brand, it is definitely a relevant measure.

A conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI) was proposed in a 2014 study (Arai, Yong, & Ross, 2014) called “Branding athletes: Exploration and conceptualization of athlete brand image.” This study explored the construct of athlete brand image. It defined an athlete brand as “a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market.” The model of athlete brand image (MABI) was developed with the consideration of three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle; defined by an athlete’s on-field characteristics, attractive external appearance, and off-field marketable attributes. According to this study, an athlete’s personal brand will help his or her post-athletic career because it

gives well-branded athletes the ability to leverage their brand past their post-athletic careers and into new endeavors.

It is necessary to further explain the model of athlete brand image used in this study (Arai et al., 2014). The first measurement is athletic performance, referring to an athlete's sports performance. Athletic performance is divided into athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship and rivalry. The second measurement is attractive appearance, referring to an athlete's attractive external appearance and is defined by physical attractiveness and body fitness on the field. The third measurement is marketable lifestyle, referring to "an athlete's off the field marketable features that could be indicative of his or her value and personality" (102). This measurement is further divided into life story, role model and relationship effort, such as communicating with fans.

Brand management is important for athletes because the concept of personal branding is well-suited for them: "The concept of an athlete brand has emerged from their multi-functional and multi-platform nature. Athletes are considered not only as vehicles for advertisements or product endorsement but also as cultural products that can be sold as 'brands'" (97). Again, it is emphasized that basing an athlete's brand on solely athletic performance is dangerous because "athletes are considered to be unstable products in the sports industry because of the potential risks for unexpected injuries or performance slumps. Considering those risks, athletes are truly in need of strong branding strategies" (98). Many associate the idea of branding with sponsorships and product endorsement. However, it is important to categorize celebrity product endorsement as a form of co-branding: "the essence of co-branding is a public

relationship between independent brands, recent endorsement studies have begun to discuss endorsers as independent brands and consider their relationship as ‘co-branding’ rather than as simply endorsers and endorsees” (Arai et al., 2014).

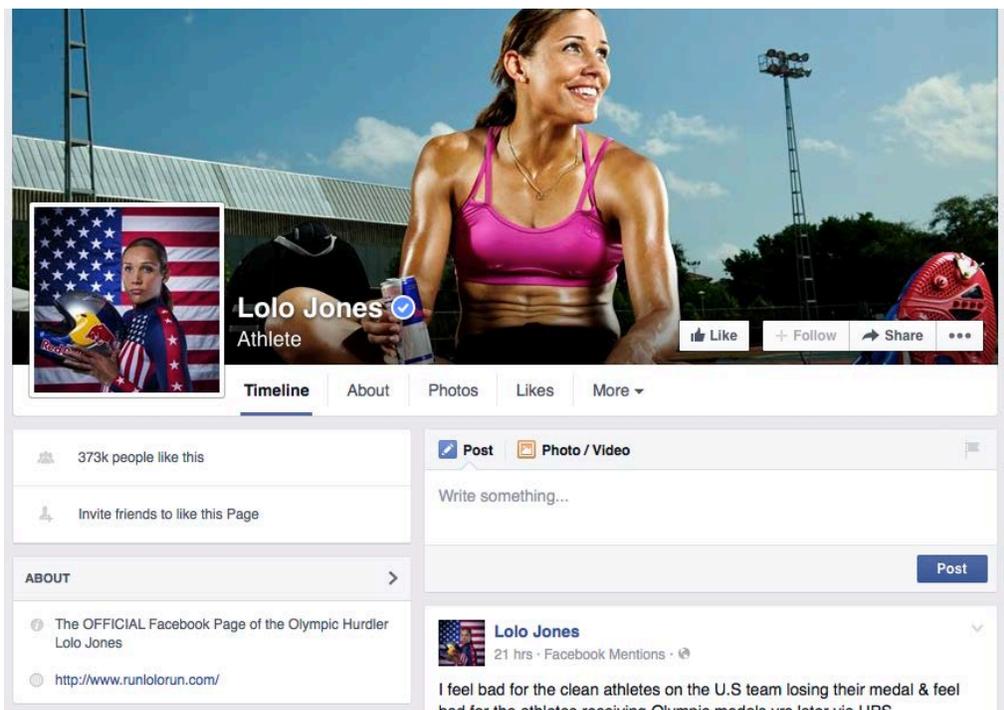
The success of personal branding is important for professional female athletes and collegiate female athletes, and I argue moreso than male athletes. The reason for this is that on the field performance is underemphasized for female athletes.

### **Professional Female Athletes’ Brands**

Examining examples of professional female athletes with strong personal brands is important for the understanding of the study. United States Olympic hurdler and bobsled athlete Lolo Jones’ career is one example of strong personal branding. Jones won three NCAA titles at Louisiana State University and earned 11 All-American honors. At the 2008 Beijing summer Olympics, she was favored to win the 110-meter hurdles race but tripped and finished in seventh place (Lolo Jones, 2015). At the 2012 London summer Olympics, Jones again failed to make the podium, finishing fourth. Jones’ 2014 Sochi winter Olympics bobsled team finished eleventh. Although she has never won an Olympic medal, Jones has built herself as a household name, and her personal brand is an example worthy of emulation.



Jones posted a photo with her mother on Mother's Day 2015. She has 197,000 followers on her Instagram account.



Jones' Facebook page has 373,000 likes as of May 2015.



Jones often tweets about her faith. Her Twitter account has 409,000 followers.

The WNBA’s Tulsa Shock’s Skylar Diggins is also an example of successful personal branding. Initially discouraged from becoming a professional basketball player, two years after being drafted, Diggins:

“has been profiled by *Vogue*, *Essence*, and the *New York Times* Style section. She appeared on the April cover of Avon's beauty magalog *Mark*, scored a spot in this year's [2014] *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, and landed endorsements from Nike and Sprint. She sat front row during February's New York Fashion Week and kissed Drake on live television after he practically begged her to at last month's ESPY Awards—and this was all after becoming the first female athlete to sign with Jay-Z's Roc Nation.” (Lieber, 2014)

Sports analysts argue that Diggins does one important thing very differently than most WNBA players: During the offseason she stays in the United States instead of playing overseas for a significantly higher salary. For the purpose of perspective, Los Angeles Sparks star Candace Parker makes \$105,000 playing for the WNBA for four months, compared to the \$1.2 million she makes playing overseas with Russia’s UMMC Ekaterinburg during the WNBA’s offseason. Increased visibility and commitment to her fan base could be one reason why Diggins has built such a successful personal brand. To put salaries further in perspective, “the average earnings of a WNBA player

is estimated at \$72,000 and their maximum salary is capped at \$107,000. Meanwhile, NBA players like Kobe Bryant made more than \$30 million last season alone” (Lieber, 2014).



Diggins’ Instagram account has 794,000 followers as of May 2015.



Diggins posts about plans to host her own talk show. Her Facebook page has 332,000 likes as of May 2015.

## **Research Design**

### **Research Question**

This research study sought to explore the personal branding efforts of professional and collegiate female athletes. Based on literature review and identified gaps in existing knowledge about female athletes and their personal brands, the study focused on the following research question:

How do personal brands of professional female athletes influence collegiate female athletes?

### **Research Methods**

Thirteen female student-athletes participated in the study and represented all 11 varsity women sports teams at the University of Oregon: acrobatics & tumbling, basketball, cross country, golf, lacrosse, softball, soccer, sand volleyball, tennis, track & field and indoor volleyball. All interviews were conducted and audio recorded in a private tutoring room at the John E. Jaqua Academic Center for Student-Athletes on the University of Oregon campus and took about 10-15 each minutes to complete. The following questions were used as an interview guide for each interview:

Personal branding expert Peter Montoya defined your personal brand as “the powerful, clear, positive idea that comes to mind whenever other people think of you. It’s what you stand for—the values, abilities and actions that others associate with you.” Do you agree with this definition? Why or why not? How would you define personal branding in your own words?

How do you think personal branding during your time at the University of Oregon will help your long-term career development, athletically and non-athletically?

Do you follow any female professional athletes on social media? If yes, on which platforms and why do you follow these female professional athletes? What do you notice about most of their posts?

Do you feel like you have a good sense of who female athletes are on social media? Why?

Is there a female athlete that you look up to as a role model? If yes, please describe any aspects of their personal brand? What do you admire about their personal brand?

Please describe your own personal brand. Has any female athlete been influential in building your personal brand? If yes, who and why?

How old are you?

What is your year in school?

What sport do you play?

What social media platforms do you use?

### **Research Setting**

The research for this study was conducted with a small sample at one university. Because this research took place in an unique environment, it is necessary to analyze the university and athletic department setting and understand how the environment may influence behavior. As of the fall of 2014, 24,181 undergraduate students were enrolled at the University of Oregon (UO Facts, 2015). Only 520 of these undergraduate students are varsity student-athletes, and even fewer female student-athletes. The university sponsors 17 NCAA sports in the PAC12 and MPSF conferences, 7 men's and 11 women's (John E. Jaqua Academic Center, 2015).

Eugene, Oregon, is nicknamed Tracktown, USA, because of the strength of its track and field program and its connection to Nike. Bill Bowerman coached the

University of Oregon track team for 24 years before co-founding Nike with chairman Phil Knight, who ran track at the university. The University of Oregon athletic department is home to 24 NCAA championships, most of which belong to the track and field teams.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Student-athletes' perceptions about personal branding**

This section presents research about student-athletes' knowledge and thoughts on personal branding. It will address their opinions on Peter Montoya's definition of personal branding ("the powerful, clear, positive idea that comes to mind whenever other people think of you. It's what you stand for—the values, abilities and actions that others associate with you"). This section also discusses the student-athletes' own definitions of personal branding and how much importance they place on personal branding for the purposes of long-term career development.

It is important to analyze student-athletes' perceptions about personal branding before analyzing data about perceptions about personal brands on social media. Most student-athletes agreed with Montoya's definition but had reservations that all personal brands are positive. The student-athletes' self-made definitions of personal branding included the key themes of representation, portrayal and consistency. Student-athletes voiced a strong understanding that personal branding can have a huge impact on their long-term career development, both athletically and non-athletically. Many answered with the belief that the University of Oregon as a national brand serves as a strong foundation for their own personal brands.

#### *Defining personal branding*

Research showed that all of the student-athletes interviewed agreed with parts of Montoya's definition of a personal brand. The one word that most participants struggled with was "positive" because they voiced concerns that when unfavorable things happen,

the personal brand of the individual in question may become negative. One student-athlete said, “Sometimes you see athletes, and you may not agree with what they have done or just a bad light is shone on them, and their brand might become negative.”

However, as a whole, most student-athletes agreed with Montoya’s decision and used the following words in their reasoning: representation, portrayal, impressions, actions, and reflection.

These words were also common responses when the student-athletes were asked to define personal branding in their own words. To combine all the student-athletes’ definitions into one answer to this question would be along the lines of “Displaying who you are and what you stand for to the world.” The following are notable answers from the study participants when asked how they would define personal branding in their own words:

1. “How you display yourself to others and the world...What you want to put out there for other people to think of you as and know or understand what you stand for or what you represent as a person.”
2. “Personal branding is like marketing yourself to the world in a positive way to serve as a good role model.”

Student-athletes’ definitions also commented on consistency as an important component of personal branding:

1. “It is like that cliché quote, like doing the things when people aren’t looking, and doing them everyday.”
2. “What an individual does consistently that gives other people an opinion of them.”

The main themes surrounding the student-athletes’ definitions of personal branding centered on ideas of who you are and what you stand for, as well as consistently serving

as role models for others. The participants also frequently discussed portraying themselves to the world, as opposed to just “others.” This provides insight into the mindset of student-athletes and how large an audience they dream of reaching.

### *Personal branding for career development*

Student-athletes showed an impressive understanding of the importance of personal branding for the purposes of long-term career development, both athletically and non-athletically. Many student-athletes voiced their hopes that the strength of the University of Oregon as a brand itself will help them with their personal career goals. They stated that being an Oregon athlete already provides a strong foundation as a national brand for them to build upon because it is a recognizable school with impressive athletic accomplishments. Oregon student-athletes are exposed to educational courses around personal branding with social media classes for incoming freshmen, and many student-athletes stated that their coaches push the daily idea of personal branding. Athletic department administrators remind student-athletes that they are representing themselves and their university by their actions on and off the field. Student-athletes recognize the importance of building a strong personal brand whether they hope to play professionally or not. The following are direct statements from study participants about how personal branding will help their long-term career development both on and off the field:

1. “I think it will help me a lot in both the business world and the sports industry if I stay in that. Being here has given me a foundation of good principles to work off of and I think we have a lot of core values that are repeated time and time again, like what they expect of us but also what we expect of ourselves.”

2. “I hope to continue playing after college so I think if I give myself a good personal brand, it would help if I got the opportunity to get a sponsorship or something like that. I think personal branding would be really important because they want someone who is good on and off the field.”
3. “The stuff you do now and how you act around campus will affect you later on in life. I think this is the time when you find yourself too.”
4. “I think knowing that being a professional athlete wasn’t an option for me [because of my sport] really helped me to focus on the next steps.”

### **Following professional female athletes on social media**

Research revealed that 23 percent of the student-athletes interviewed answered that they do not follow any female professional athletes on any social media. This information is interesting because it revealed that some student-athletes are missing the opportunity to learn from role models and see what the professional athletes are doing everyday to accomplish their goals. At the very least, it is surprising to learn that some student-athletes might not have the slightest interest in the professionals athletes’ lifestyles.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, 77 percent of the student-athletes interviewed do follow professional female athletes on social media. Of these student-athletes, many follow professionals in their same sport. The following list details this data further:

1. Oregon women’s basketball player follows Elena Delle Donne of the WNBA
2. Oregon golfer follows professional golfers Paula Creamer and Anika Sorenstam

3. Oregon softball player follows professional softball players Jackie Traina, Kelly Kretschman, Lauren Lappin, Courtney Ceo; and former professional softball player, Jackie Pasquarella
4. Oregon track and field athlete follows professional heptathlete Brianne Theisen-Eaton and professional thrower Michelle Carter
5. Both Oregon volleyball players interviewed follow professional sand volleyball player Kerri Walsh
6. Oregon women's tennis player follows professional tennis players Kim Clijsters and Maria Sharapova
7. Oregon acrobatics and tumbling athlete follows former professional gymnast Shawn Johnson

Student-athletes also answered that they follow Lindsey Vonn, Mia Hamm, Alex Morgan, Maya Moore, and Bethany Hamilton, even though they do not compete in the same sports.

*Why follow these professional athletes?*

Research shows that student-athletes follow professional athletes on social media for a variety of reasons: Professional athletes serve as role models, as motivational figures, or as personal friends. The top reasons for following professional athletes provide insight into why student-athletes follow professional athletes that do not compete in their same sport. Student-athletes' answers to interview questions put more emphasis on the professional athletes' lifestyles and personalities than their respective sports. An Oregon golfer said, "Lindsey Vonn [professional skier] is actually one of my favorite people. I think she's awesome. You can tell she has really good energy and is just very involved and excited about life." While reflecting on professional athletes' social media posts, student-athletes said that they noticed the professionals posted most about faith, family, community, and sport, all while keeping a

positive attitude. However, student-athletes hesitated to say that they felt like they have a good sense of the professional athletes' personalities beyond their social media accounts.

Student-athletes' interview answers revealed that they follow professional athletes because they admire their lifestyle and look up to them as role models. The professional athletes that student-athletes identified as role models are Elena Delle Donne, Anika Sorenstam, Jackie Pasquarella, Michelle Carter, Serena Williams, Shawn Johnson, Kerri Walsh, Misty May, and Maya Moore. The following direct quotes detail how the student-athletes explained their reasoning for following professionals on social media regarding overall lifestyle:

“I think they are good role models, and they are a good people for me to learn from and learn how I would want to portray myself.”

“I feel like Bethany [Hamilton] is a really good role model for me, just being open about her religious side, and I think that I would like to live that healthy, wholesome lifestyle. Just being about friends, family and God. She has inspired me to do that.”

Expectedly, student-athletes also voiced that they follow professional athletes because they serve as motivational figures regarding success in sports. By following professional athletes, the student-athletes are able to see the exact steps that they took to get to the highest level. Student-athletes voiced that visual motivation was also a factor, because when they see impressive pictures of professional athletes working out or competing, it provides motivation:

“Brienne [Theisen-Eaton] won a silver medal in the world championship and that's something I want to do. I want to get to that stage. So I think I follow them to see what they're up to.”

“Kerri Walsh posts a lot of action shots that are really cool. It makes me want to be a better volleyball player.”

The final reason that student-athletes follow professional athletes may be specific to Oregon because of its success in producing professional athletes. Student-athletes said that they follow professionals that are their friends, usually former Oregon teammates that have moved on to the professional stage, to keep in touch and maintain their relationship.

“I follow her because I actually knew her when I was younger...She was always so positive and encouraging, just a great leader.”

“I would say I just follow friends of mine who are track athletes and Olympians. I don’t really follow any people that I don’t know, and I guess that I am fortunate enough to have known some pretty good athletes.”

Student-athletes were asked what they noticed most about professional athletes posts. The most common answers included faith, family, community, and sport—everything one would expect of a top level athlete. The overarching answer was a positive attitude. Student-athletes noted that most of the professional athletes that they follow on social media portray positive but realistic attitudes by recognizing when life is hard at times. Student-athletes noted the maturity of the professionals’ posts, proven by the absence of “selfies” and the presence of posts about others. The professional athletes posts show that they care about more than just themselves because they post about family, faith and the community around them. Some student-athletes also voiced that they notice when professionals do not post about their personal life at all. A spectrum exists regarding what professional athletes post, but the common theme is that

notable posts are always mature and positive, whether it includes the athlete's personal life or not. The following are quotes addressing the professional athletes' posts:

"She's [Delle Donne] a very family and community based person. Her sister is a big thing about her brand, and I think that's a good thing. Basketball comes second."

"She [Sharapova] doesn't post anything about her personal life. That's what I respect, what she reveals, she reveals a little insight, but keeps her personal life personal."

"Bethany [Hamilton] does post sometimes about her religion, her relationship with God. And I feel like she shows her wholesome lifestyle."

"She's [Maya Moore] always motivating people and always encouraging them to do their best. And at the same time, she's one of the best. So it's just really positive to see that she's still able to influence other people."

Although student-athletes say they admire the brands of professional athletes, they hesitate to think that they have a genuine sense of who the professional athletes are as people. Most student-athletes answered that they felt like they got a good sense of who the professionals are sometimes, but voiced that it is impossible to know if it's completely genuine unless you know the athlete on a personal level. Common answers included that personal brands are "only a surface of them [professional athletes]," and that one "does not get a sense of them [professional athlete] personally, but does get a sense of their brand."

### **The student-athlete brand**

Identifying the personal brands of professional female athletes was relatively easy for most student-athletes, but when they were asked to describe their own brands, the most common reaction was to hesitate and say, "I don't know." Some student-

athletes even doubted that they had a personal brand of their own. Once the student-athletes thought about it more, answers revolved around the following:

Community

University of Oregon athlete

Hard worker

Honest person

Prioritizing

Positive outlook

Leader

The following is a list of how student-athletes identified their own personal brands:

1. "I don't have a brand, I don't know."
2. "I don't know what my personal brand is. I haven't really thought about that. I would say well-rounded. I kind of like to do my personal brand as like helping others...it's doesn't need to totally benefit me, but the greater whole."
3. "I try to never say anything. Never subtweet...I try to come off as outgoing and funny, but definitely being known for softball. It's a big part of my brand."
4. "I'm not sure that I necessarily have one other than a University of Oregon athlete... As for right now, I think just student-athlete, representing Oregon, and I'm going to take the next steps later."
5. "I try to portray myself as a creative person, a person that is aware of not only the art in society and media, but also in everyday things like fashion and I like the outdoors...So I try to keep a balance between what I want to focus on and my career, but also my hobbies...But I definitely try to keep a creative personal brand."
6. "I want to be perceived as a hard worker, and an honest person, and someone that's real and not fake."
7. "I'm serious. I'm very serious, but I'm also not not funny. I focused a lot on school right now, my brand is prioritizing. I know what comes first,

and for me I would do anything to do that first. For now that's tennis and my team and then school and then my friends and then just staying loyal to them. I'd say I'm more loyal than anything."

8. "I like to make everybody else happy. I try to do the right thing. I'm a hard worker and I try to be a good leader on the team."
9. "Volleyball, friends, school. I try to have a positive view. I hope to portray hardworking, successful... Kind of what everyone wants to portray, a good person."
10. "Very positive and hardworking. Just because I try to have a positive outlook on life and hopefully I can spread that to other people."
11. "I don't know if I can say my own personal brand because I think in different situations it's different. So I guess my brand would change depending the situation I'm in, so I think that my personal brand I that it changes. It's adaptive."
12. "I hope other people would see that I'm hardworking, I'm a leader and that I just get things done. I think I'm direct in a good way."

## **Summary of Findings**

Qualitative research with thirteen female student-athletes suggests that they look up to professional female athletes with personal brands that maintain a positive attitude and are focused on faith, family and the community. Student-athletes follow professional athletes in their own sports, as well as, professional athletes that compete in sports different than their own. Student-athletes discussed that they follow professional athletes for a number of reasons: because they serve as role models, as motivational figures, and as personal friends. Student-athletes stated that they try to model themselves after professional athletes whose lifestyles they admire. They also look to professional athletes for athletic motivation, by following them step by step through their athletic careers and learning what is necessary for them to do to succeed to equal ranks. Student-athletes also follow professionals because they are their friends, and usually former teammates from the University of Oregon's highly successful athletic department.

Not all student-athletes follow professionals on social media—Three of the study participants stated that they do not follow any professional athletes on social media, but still demonstrated an understanding for the importance of personal branding for non-athletic career development.

Student-athletes easily created definitions for personal branding, most focusing on the ideas of what you stand for and who you are, along with serving as a consistent role model. When discussing the topic of personal branding, most student-athletes used the words representation, portrayal, impressions, actions, and reflections. However, student-athletes struggled to describe their own personal brands, and some even doubted

that they had a personal brand at all. These answers reveal that student-athlete education around personal branding could be expanded so that they can recognize their own brands as easily as they can recognize their role model's brands. This will make them stronger both on and off the field and help them in their career development. A few student-athletes voiced that after the interview they would think more about their brand and act on it more consciously.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Results from the study indicated a definition of personal branding specific to student-athletes. The study participants tailored Montoya's definition of a personal brand to remove the word "positive" because of concerns that personal brands are not always positive. The student-athlete definition of a personal brand is: "Displaying who you are and what you stand for to the world."

### **Practical Implications**

This study should benefit both collegiate female athletes and professional female athletes in career development efforts. Due to unexpected injuries and slumps in performance, personal branding is one of the only things an athlete can control in her career. By using the model of athlete brand image to evaluate the athletes' brands themselves, female athletes will be able to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their own personal brands. It is increasingly important for professional female athletes to emphasize on their personal brands. At the most, this study should create further conversation about the inequities in the professional sporting world using evidence from the female athlete's need for personal brands.

*For Female Collegiate Athletes*

Whether female collegiate athletes are looking to join a professional league, enter the working world, or play professional and then enter another industry, it is important they learn how to brand themselves early, in order to make the most of the opportunity. There is life after sports and it is extremely useful to use your personal brand as a collegiate athlete to build a life for yourself off the field.

*For Female Professional Athletes*

Current professional female athletes serve as role models and inspiration, and maybe this study can prove to them to the true affect they can have on female athletes at lower levels and the growth of women sports in general.

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