



# 7 DEADLY 7 SINS

OF MARKETING WOMEN'S SPORT

**DARK  
HORSES**





### CHARITY

*Consigning women's sport to a cause*



### UNITY

*Homogenising female athletes*



### SERVITUDE

*Keeping women's sport in the shadow of men's*

7 DEADLY SINS

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# DEADLY 7 SINS



### LUST

*Prioritising aesthetic over athleticism*



### PROPHECY

*Focusing on the future not the present*

## OF MARKETING WOMEN'S SPORT

### CHASTITY

*Fixating on wholesomeness not drama*



### PENURY

*Portraying women's sport as amateurish*





## THE QUEST FOR PARITY

At Dark Horses we passionately believe that women's sport will achieve genuine parity with the men's game.

With sustained momentum, consistent growth and a record-breaking 2021 that saw 32.9 viewers tune into women's sport in the UK, it's very much on the way. But how soon depends on how we market women's sport in the critical coming years.

Despite its draconian title, this document is not a tiresome tirade against perceived sinners. Instead, it's a practical guide that identifies the challenges of promoting women's sport.

## CHASING VISIBILITY

To date, the core strategy to close the gap between men's and women's sport has been visibility.

Visibility fuels change: young women need to 'see it to be it', fans need to be exposed to it to care, and brands need audience numbers to justify investment. As a result broadcasters, journalists and sponsors have worked together to create greater exposure of women's sport.

But this visibility is not enough to close the gap on its own. More important than the quantity of impressions is the quality of the stories we tell. This is especially relevant for creative marketers who understand the power of the message, not just the medium.

## BELIEVING NOT JUST SEEING

Over the last century sports marketing has become very good at getting fans to believe. Sport exists because of humanity's ability to buy into a shared belief - the result matters to me, because it matters to you.

When it comes to marketing women's sport however, we move away from many of the tried and tested principles. In our desperation to hasten change, and because we feel we have to market women's sport differently, we have invented new rules.

A lot of these new narratives not only do a disservice to women's sport but even set it back. They undermine much of the brilliance on the pitch and create doubt in fans' eyes. If we're serious about achieving parity, our objective shouldn't be to just get fans to see - it's to get fans to believe.

We need to tell better stories and add more drama to the women's game. We need to focus on spectacles, characters, plotlines and controversy. That is what hooks fans in most.

In this paper, we have sought to identify and delve into the seven key pitfalls the industry often falls into when it comes to marketing women's sport.

# 7 DEADLY SINS OF MARKETING WOMEN'S SPORT





*The SIN of*

# CHARITY



*CONSIGNING  
WOMEN'S SPORT  
TO A CAUSE*

## THE SIN

For many brands and organisations women's sport offers a great marketing opportunity to tell a diversity and inclusion story.

The assumption that female athletes are fighting more broadly for gender empowerment has become so normalised it is now arguably the dominant marketing narrative. The metaphor is both simple and attractive - the power of female athletes on the pitch represents the strength of femininity off it.

But this dangerously traps women's sport in D&I departments. It becomes a movement, a proof point of greater good. And whilst this strategy may help tick boxes within a business, it chronically undermines the perception of entertainment on the pitch. It makes women's sport feel like something fans should support, not something they want to watch. It may make brands seem progressive but it doesn't progress the game.

This can be confusing because it's true that sport is very good at highlighting societal causes. But sport only has the

power to do that because it has captured fan attention through entertainment first.

Women's sport doesn't exist to right a wrong, it exists to entertain us.

## THE VIRTUE

We should keep the attitude in these campaigns but redirect it, away from overcoming inequality, and more towards the confidence and swagger of entertainers.

Women's sport is not a pawn for a bigger cause, it is world class entertainment to which all fans should be irresistibly drawn.

These women aren't victims of historical prejudice, they're the very best in the world at what they do.

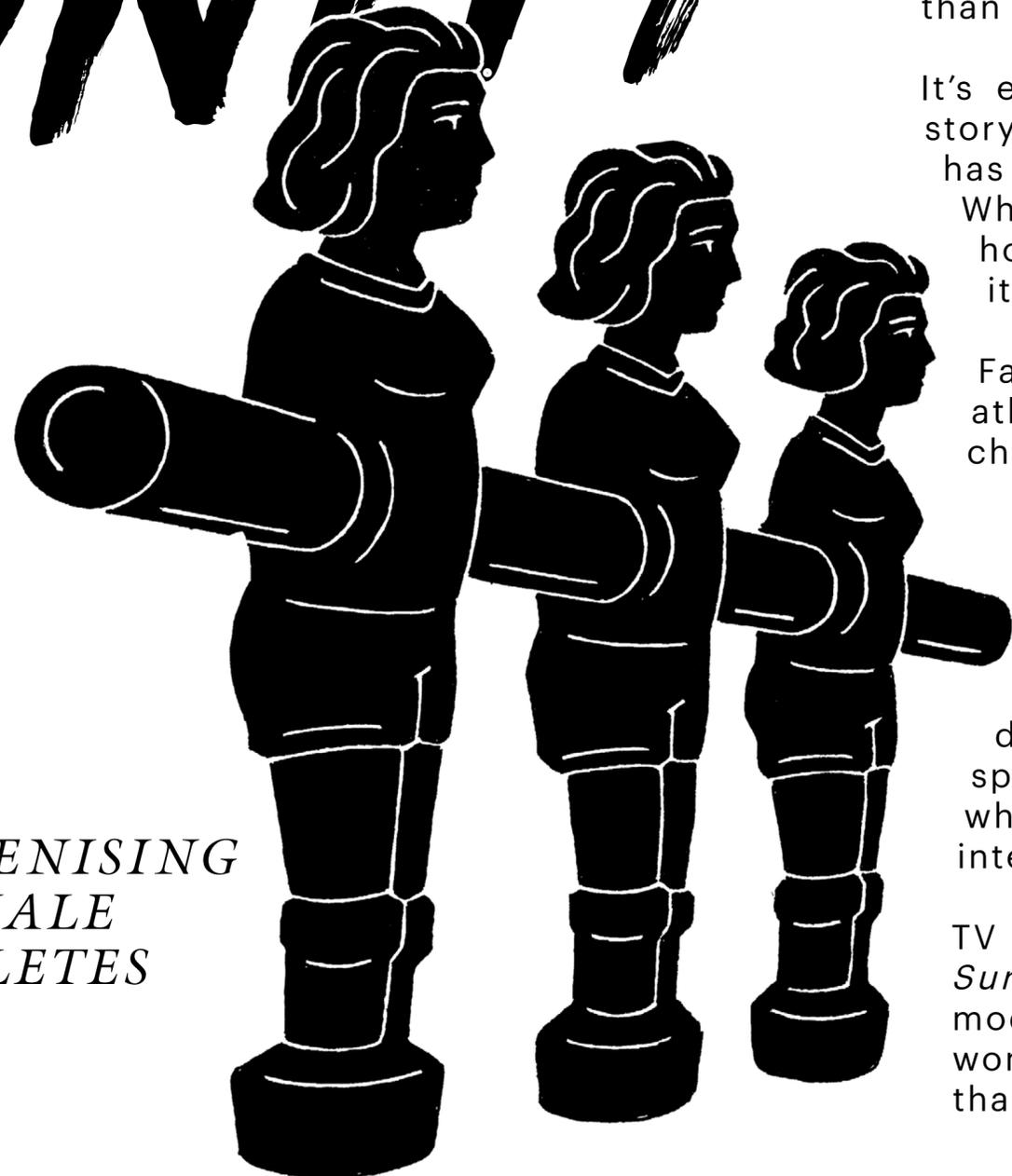
They don't need you to support their cause, they need you to support them on the pitch.





The *SIN* of

UNITY



HOMOGENISING  
FEMALE  
ATHLETES

## THE SIN

Female athletes should never be marketed as a unified collective. It creates a monochrome aggregate of togetherness. A story of sisterhood, of female athletes uniting together over something bigger than the game.

It's easy to see why this is an attractive story for many brands. Unity in feminism has been both effective and powerful. When it comes to marketing sport, however, it corrodes women's sport of its natural storylines.

Fans care about individuality, about an athlete's back story, their goals, their character and their personal lives.

The best sporting rivalries come from opposite characters off the pitch, not just a great contest on it. The greater the difference between these individual athletes, the more delicious the drama is. Friendship and sportsmanship is always welcome, but what really captures fan attention is intense rivalries.

TV shows like *All or Nothing* or *Drive To Survive* have helped us understand how modern sporting stories can be told. In women's sport we do the opposite. Rather than dial up the difference between

athletes, we ask them to conform to society's expectations of what a female athlete should be.

## THE VIRTUE

As much as possible we need to focus on the individuals within any group and dial up the competition and the rivalry between them. Great sporting contests are talked up by brands, media and broadcasters. They aren't always entirely organic, and can often even be manufactured.

We shouldn't be afraid if athletes have strong beliefs that counter the prevailing narrative of a female athlete - difference is a good thing.





The *SIN* of

# SERVITUDE



*KEEPING  
WOMEN'S  
SPORT IN THE  
SHADOW OF  
MEN'S*

## THE SIN

Women's sport should never be promoted as a support act to the men's game. In an attempt to increase interest and attendance, we often keep the women's game close to the men's. We organise matches alongside (usually before) men's games and we lean on male athletes to attract interest in their female counterparts.

This is all designed to shine a light on the women's game, but that light also casts a shadow that is difficult for women's sport to escape from.

In particular, it leads marketers to adopt a sidekick narrative. Women's sport can be seen as a minor added extra in a sponsorship portfolio, or female athletes are used as hygiene factors alongside male superstars. This assumes a form of gender apartheid: that physical performance is better in men's sport, and therefore the women's game will always be inferior in some way. Yet studies have shown that some women's sport is actually technically more interesting and exciting than men's.

Any idea that uses the men's game to give the women's game credibility is dangerous.

## THE VIRTUE

We need to give women's sport its own space to flourish. Brands should look to prioritise women's sport over men's, rather than just having it as part of their portfolio. They should create content using female athletes as the heroes not sidekicks to the men.

If we, as marketers, don't have faith in its ability to captivate on its own, why should fans believe?

Because attendance at women's sports is proving otherwise. This year's Women's Rugby 6 Nations has achieved two attendance records already. FC Barcelona Femini achieved a record 91,648 attendance at the Camp Nou. Similarly the way ESPN and WNBA partnered for their orange hoodies campaign put all the attention on the women's game, rather than leaning on the men's game.

The *SIN* of

# PROPHECY



*FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE  
NOT THE PRESENT*

## THE SIN

Women's sport should never be positioned as changing, improving or on a journey.

When it comes to women's sport, too much of our energy goes into star-gazing. We talk about the journey women's sport is on and call out current athletes as trail-blazers, game-changers and role models. We make them a gateway to something better, not the pinnacle in their own right.

This is a problem because saying a product is improving has two harmful consequences.

Firstly, and very simply, it's inherently defeatist, implying that women's sport is coming from a negative place; that, to date, it hasn't been great.

Secondly, it suggests it is not the finished article. Fans don't want something that is getting better, they want the very best right now.

A tech company would never promote their latest product as a gateway to something better. The newest model is only ever compared to the past and glorified as the absolute ultimate technology can deliver right now.

The sin of prophecy isn't just a disservice to the superstars of today, it's bad marketing.

## THE VIRTUE

We must ensure we always focus on the here and now, rather than gaze into the future.

Ahead of this Women's Euros it would be refreshing to celebrate the incredible skill and competition on show right now, not the inspiration that will lead to future stars.

Sport is built on tradition and repetition. Fans love looking backwards because it gives today's achievements context. You might be led to believe that in many sports the women's game doesn't have a rich history but this is rarely the case. Even in the case of football, the women's game had legends and heroes over 100 years ago.





# The SIN of PENIURY



*PORTRAYING  
WOMEN'S SPORT  
AS AMATEURISH*

## THE SIN

For women's sport to achieve parity it has to be presented as the ultimate in professionalism.

Every touchpoint matters for fans. The stadia they play in, the pre-match entertainment, the write-ups, the sense of fanfare ahead of the event and yes, the money female athletes earn.

Money and sport have always had a complex relationship. Fans may feign disgust at the commercialisation of modern sport, but the truth is they're irresistibly drawn to money.

Nothing gets their attention more than big money contests. It's how the FedEx Cup with its \$18m prize became golf's most talked about golf competition. Similarly, paying an individual player an obscene salary is the fastest way to turn them into a deified superstar.

Some marketers lean into the antithesis of this narrative with women's sport. It's comforting because they are more 'like us'. They are underdogs that love the struggle, and love the sport for the purest of reasons.

However this narrative only reinforces the perceptions of amateurism.

And nothing erodes trust in women's sport like amateurism.

## THE VIRTUE

We need to make sure every touchpoint around professional women's sport is as elite and prestigious as it can be. Anything that appears low-budget will turn fans off. There is no point creating exciting marketing campaigns that dial up the drama if fans turn up to a run-down stadium with terrible facilities.

We should be brave enough to celebrate extravagance. Don't be afraid to dramatise the prize on offer and talk about big pay packets. This is something the LPGA are leading the way on - in 2022 the winner of golf's CME Group Tour Championship will pocket \$2m.

Centering marketing campaigns around female superstars who are anything but embarrassed about the money their abilities have generated isn't polluting women's sport - it's parity.





*The SIN of*

# CHASTITY



*FIXATING ON  
WHOLESOMENESS  
OVER DRAMA*

## THE SIN

Women's sport should never be sanitised, purified or presented as more wholesome.

Many administrators see the rise of women's sport as an opportunity to avoid some of the mistakes made in the men's game. This is particularly true in football, where organisers are proud of the family-friendly atmosphere.

There's a desire to build women's sport in a different mould. To make it cleaner, fairer and more honourable. And this is where an underlying bias lies.

In trying to purify women's sport we're inadvertently reinforcing an outdated belief that women are more civilised, more principled, or more moral than men. Whilst seemingly flattering on the surface, these stereotypes have their origins in a deep misogyny, and the fact that they drift into modern sporting narratives is concerning.

Women should not be held to a higher standard of behaviour than men. There should be no moral inventory that they are required to live up to.

Whilst sponsors and rights-holders might be drawn to a more family-friendly, cleaner version of the game, it negatively affects the sporting drama for fans. Wholesome is vanilla. It's not exciting. Dangerously, it's boring.

## THE VIRTUE

Fans enjoy the drama. Some of the most talked about characters in sport have been the most controversial. Many are adored exactly because of those flaws; that evidence of humanity.

We should never try and purify women's sport, nor hold those who play it to higher moral values. Don't be afraid of a little 'dirt'. It adds to the controversy and storylines, and adds depth and dimensions to its characters.

We should actively dial up the intense competition on the pitch. If two sides really don't like each other, we should try and capture that drama and celebrate it, not seek to stifle or dissipate it.





The *SIN* of

# LUST

*PRIORITISING  
AESTHETIC  
OVER  
ATHLETICISM*



## THE SIN

Sportswomen are frequently presented in ways that emphasise their sexuality, not their athletic prowess. It's an archaic social construct that's a form of worship to the male gaze.

This unhealthy obsession on looks has historically rewarded 'graceful' sports that conform to a traditionally feminine image, such as tennis, gymnastics and volleyball; to the detriment of 'aggressive' sports that are deemed to be inherently masculine, like football, rugby and boxing.

Alongside this narrow-minded perspective sits the constant scrutiny and negative terminology around sexuality and gender for female athletes who fail to conform to this feminine ideal. The more female athletes express strength, aggression and independence, the more the media pillories them for being butch, manly or some other such disparaging descriptor.

Aside from the obvious sexism, this focus on female sexuality dehumanises women, making them a commodity, and sometimes even pressuring them into an unhealthy obsession with body image.

It reinforces a patriarchal and patronising hierarchy that makes it harder for fans to confer the same respect on female athletes

as they do for men. And with less respect, there is less engagement, further hindering progress.

And it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Female athletes have often had to embrace the media's sexualisation to gain publicity and endorsements, because, let's face it, that's been the easiest way to earn the big bucks.

## THE VIRTUE

Of course, we can start by stopping the sexualisation of female athletes as a lazy go-to. But also, stop policing the appearance of women in sport; stop framing narratives through a lens of male ideals; stop determining the limits of femininity; stop judging and stop scrutinising.

Then we can begin the positive affirmation. Encourage female athletes to reclaim their right to physical expression. Admire, celebrate and champion athleticism, strength and power in women's sport. That means normalising and glorifying sweating, muscles, competitive aggression and most importantly, winning.

Let's drop the double standards, and apply the same principles of respect, admiration and awe that we give to male athletes.



# SIN

*The sin of CHARITY*  
(Treating women's sport as a cause)

*The sin of UNITY*  
(Homogenising female athletes)

*The sin of SERVITUDE*  
(Keeping women's sport in the shadow of men's)

*The sin of PROPHECY*  
(Focusing on the future not the present)

*The sin of PENURY*  
(Portraying women's sport as amateurish)

*The sin of CHASTITY*  
(Prioritising wholesomeness over drama)

*The sin of LUST*  
(Prioritising aesthetic over athleticism)

# VIRTUE

Focus on entertainment, attitude and swagger

Tell the story of individuals within the group

Give women's sport its own space to flourish

Emphasise the here and now, not the future

Always position women's sport as elite and extravagant

Don't be afraid of drama and controversy within women's sport

Reclaim the right to physical expression





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WOMEN'S SPORT

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