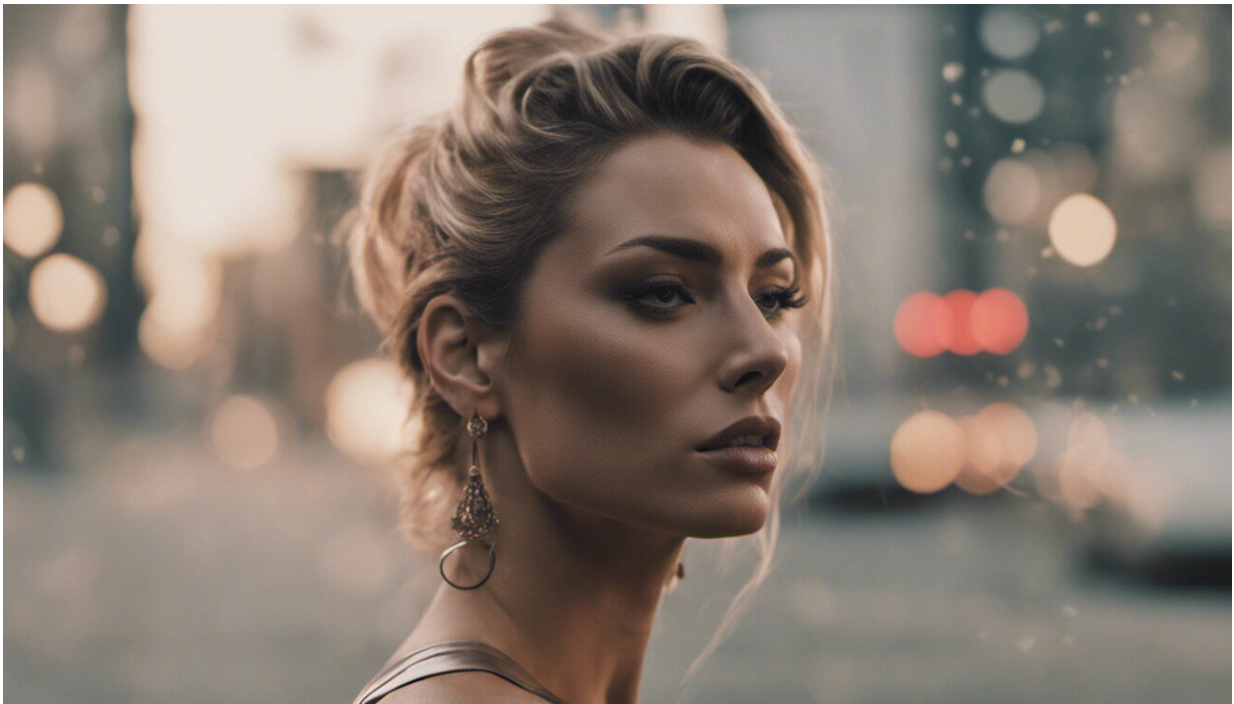


How female athletes feel forced to choose between a 'strong' or 'feminine' look

August 29 2023, by Alison Owen



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As I watched the Fifa Women's World Cup, I was probably one of many who couldn't help but feel inspired by the women on the pitch, showing their elite fitness and ability. However, many female athletes have spoken out about the pressures they feel in regards to their bodies and the way they look.

Good mental health is [vital to sports performance](#). So it is crucial our athletes feel positive about their [body image](#) and mental health if they are to achieve their potential.

Professional young athletes [make sacrifices](#) for example forgoing family commitments and [social life](#) and enduring [financial hardship](#), that alter their life course.

They dedicate their lives to sport achievement, but pressures from media and their own coaches about their physique is in some cases making them more concerned about looking right than their performance.

Recently, legendary US climber [Beth Rodden](#) spoke about the pressure she felt to have a six-pack for photoshoots, and Olympic athletics champion [Jessica Ennis-Hill](#) was once called "fat" by an official at UK Athletics. The 2022 Whyte Review into allegations of abuse in British gymnastics found that coaches often publicly shamed [young gymnasts](#) about their weight.

These world-class athletes are not anomalies. A [2014 BT sport survey](#) found that 80% of the 110 elite female athletes who took part felt pressure to conform to a "certain image and [body type](#)."

Double standards

My own research [interviewing female athletes](#) found they are hit by a double standard. One of the participants, Sarah, said, "For athletes, there are many pressures to be strong and fit, but also have that feminine look. I feel that athletes are put into ... two categories ... either they are labeled that they don't try hard enough, as they don't look strong or fit and muscly, or they are shamed for looking manly and it's 'too much.'"

I interviewed five female athletes to talk in-depth about their feelings

around their body image. They each performed in a different sport: football, netball, rowing, korfbal and sailing, showing how widespread the problem is.

The athletes in my study felt that these exacting standards led to intense pressure. They were battling between looking a certain way (perhaps due to cultural [pressures](#) such as maintaining a slim and toned physique), but also keeping up their athletic ability and fitness.

Other research has also found female athletes get conflicting messages about their bodies. For example, a [2017 study](#) of female Swedish athletes found that the participants felt they were forced to choose between a body that performs well in their athletic field, or a fashionable body.

There are pressures on men too. Olympic diver [Tom Daley](#) has spoken out about the body image issues he experiences as a result of pressure from the [sports industry](#). However it does seem that on the whole, women tend to feel [more pressure](#) around their appearance.

The athletes in my study also talked about how they felt male and female athletes experienced different pressures. Sarah said, "I still can't understand why women are judged so harshly on their appearance and the men aren't."

The participants mentioned objectification too, with one participant, Monica, saying: "I think that in sport ... women get objectified more than men by the public and media. Also, I think there is more focus made about women's clothing and image in the media in sport than there is for men."

Pressure from all sides

All of the athletes in the study talked about the media and its portrayal of athletes. Sarah talked about Jessica Ennis-Hill: "The media has many negative body image stories surrounding [female athletes](#) ... Jess Ennis-Hill has always been an inspiration to me and I was shocked to find stories of her being classed as overweight, from her BMI. It's clear that she is one of the fittest and healthiest women and yet the media has to try and shame her in some way."

In 2022, [researchers](#) interviewed 47 people involved in the female football industry in England, including players and coaches and found that players "under-fuel." This means they are not eating enough to meet their energy demands.

The study found that women and girls were under-eating due to misunderstandings about carbohydrates and fear of weight gain. The researchers suggested that "carbohydrate fear" is made worse by pressure from social media and coaches. It is [well documented](#) that eating disorders have a negative effect on both physical fitness and sport performance.

Most people feel some degree of pressure about the way they look. However studies have shown that for athletes, these pressures can be even more intense. It is really important for people working in the sporting industry to ensure that the people they work with are protected from body image pressure, which could [affect their results and abilities](#).

As my interviewee Monica said, "It makes me sad and angry ... to see such influential, strong, successful women be put down in the media for their body image. It's not what we, or the media, should be focusing on ... we should celebrate them as [athletes](#) ... They didn't sign up to be treated like failed supermodels."

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How female athletes feel forced to choose between a 'strong' or 'feminine' look (2023, August 29) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-08-female-athletes-strong-feminine.html>

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