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SUSAN SPANN / For The Times

Ex-swimsuit issue model Ann Simonton, now an outspoken opponent, with abstract of female form.

MARKETING / BRUCE HOROVITZ

Throwing in a Towel

Hyundai Agrees to Boycott Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue

When the annual swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated hits the newsstands Wednesday, something besides body covering will be missing.

Hyundai—a longtime advertiser—has decided to skip the issue that features revealing photographs of women in skimpy swimsuits.

"If this particular issue [of Sports Illustrated] is of concern to some of our customers, we'd prefer to steer away from it," said Joe Corey, national advertising manager at Fountain Valley-based Hyundai Motor America Corp., which particularly objects to pictures of children in swimsuits, which were in last year's issue.

Hyundai's public action may mark a turning point for women's and consumer groups that for years have voiced loud protests to the annual issue. It has long been Sports Illustrated's best-selling

issue—and by far its most popular with advertisers. The magazine has also built a multimillion-dollar industry around the issue, selling everything from calendars to videocassettes that feature models from the swimsuit edition.

The Korean car maker was swayed by the lobbying efforts of Linnea W. Smith, a psychiatrist in Chapel Hill, N.C., whose husband, Dean, is head basketball coach at the University of North Carolina.

Smith sent letters to 60 advertisers advising them that the issue is degrading to both women and children. Only Hyundai listened. But the impact of that one decision could eventually be profound.

Sports Illustrated says its swimsuit issue is read by one out of every four Americans—making it one of the best-read single issues of any magazine in the world. Advertisers pay a premium



ROBERT CROSS / For The Times

Linnea Smith persuaded Hyundai.

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MARKETING: Firm Skirts Swimsuit Issue

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to appear in it—\$156,410 for a single, full-color page. And consumers pay a premium too. This year's newsstand edition sells for \$4.95—a dollar more than last year, and \$2 more than conventional issues of Sports Illustrated.

But a backlash to the swimsuit issue could be brewing. Some advertisers say that while they plan to stick with the swimsuit issue because of its huge readership, they are increasingly hearing from consumers who don't like it.

And ad agency media buyers say that by next year, additional advertisers might be emboldened to take a harder look at whether they want to be associated with major sports publications—including Inside Sports and Sport magazines—that annually publish issues mostly devoted to models in sexy swimsuits.

For years, powerful special-interest groups have successfully coaxed major advertisers to pull their ads from certain networks, magazines or newspapers. In 1991, complaints from the conservative American Family Assn. persuaded Mazda to yank its ads from NBC's "Saturday Night Live."

And that same year, Mars Inc. pulled ads for Twix cookies after a coalition of girls' schools complained that the spot put girls' schools in a bad light.

But the action by Hyundai wasn't the result of

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CECILIA BLEWER
Women Against Pornography

threats from some well-funded group with thousands of members.

Hyundai concedes that it was the result of the efforts of one woman.

"I'll tell you this," said Smith, who also plans to send angry letters to all advertisers in the upcoming swimsuit issue, "my next car will be a Hyundai."

Besides catching the eye of some advertisers, Smith's campaign also caught the attention of her husband, the coach. "He certainly doesn't feel that Sports Illustrated's swimsuit issue does a service for the sports community," she said. "He recognizes it for what it is."

Smith began her letter-writing campaign in November, before most advertisers had completed their 1993 media buys. The letter pointedly told advertisers, "When you advertise in Sports Illustrated's swimsuit issue, you're saying to the world that it's OK to devalue women."

Most of the advertisers didn't bother to reply, Smith said. The few that did offered little encouragement. But when Hyundai told her that it agreed with her—and would not advertise in the issue—Smith never expected that the firm would go public with its reasoning. But it has.

Sports Illustrated executives are trying to play down Hyundai's action. "It's the first I've heard of an

advertiser pulling out of the swimsuit issue for reasons of taste," said John Jay, associate publisher of the magazine. Jay noted that Hyundai will continue to advertise in other issues of the magazine.

"I think there is the potential for some alienation," said Scott Bedbury, Nike's director of advertising. "But we're not just advertising in there because it's the swimsuit issue. We've bought 50 pages in their last 52 issues. With new product introductions, we need Sports Illustrated heavily in the spring."

But one critic insists that Nike—and other big advertisers such as Anheuser-Busch and Joseph E. Seagram & Sons—have other reasons for appearing in the swimsuit issue.

"The decision gets made in a male-bonding, Madison Avenue sort of way," said Cecilia Blewer, a steering committee director of the New York-based group Women Against Pornography. "Advertisers should know that a lot of women intercept this issue when it comes into their homes and, in their one feminist statement for the year, they toss it out."

Sports Illustrated executives say that's nonsense. But swimsuit issue advertisers say they are increasingly hearing from individual women and women's groups that strongly oppose the issue.

Earlier this year, protests from women led to the Atlanta Hawks basketball team canceling its annual halftime swimsuit fashion show—which for years featured women in skimpy swimsuits parading across the basketball court.

"It was becoming too big an issue," said Lee Douglas, executive vice president of the Hawks. "We decided it was best to get out of it."

That is exactly what Media Watch, a Santa Cruz-based consumer organization, wants Sports Illustrated to do.

The group's director, Ann Simonton, is a former cover-girl model for Sports Illustrated's swimsuit issue who has since become an outspoken opponent of the edition.

Her group helped Smith distribute her protest letters to the advertisers.

"Advertisers who are part of the swimsuit issue look pretty foolish," Simonton said. "They are promoting violence against women."

Briefly . . .

Vanity Fair will publish two separate covers for its March issue: one featuring a photo of Bill Clinton and the other of actress Andie MacDowell. . . . The new Hilton Hotel ad campaign, created by the Los Angeles agency Dailey & Associates, features the Cole Porter song "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To," which Porter wrote, ironically, while living at the now Hilton-owned Waldorf-Astoria in New York. . . . Billboard ads for the new Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance—featuring graphic images of Ku Klux Klan rallies and Nazi concentration camps—are raising eyebrows in Los Angeles. . . . Los Angeles ad agency chiefs expect their annual billings to increase 15% in 1993 compared to 1992, according to a poll by the Western States Advertising Agencies Assn. . . . The Fourth Annual J.D. Power Automotive Advertising Strategy Conference takes place today through Thursday at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Marina del Rey.