

Caroline Bolletino

Women Athletes Battling Bias in the Media

Since the adoption of the Title IX law in 1972, women have made increasing progress in athletics. Today in the United States there are more female athletes, sports journalists, and sports leagues than even before, and women athletes, yet these women are by no means at equality with men on both sides of the camera. Top male and female athletes achieve comparable levels of success within their sports, but sports media does not treat the genders with comparable levels of attention. At root, this is a question of simple fairness: Are men and women being treated equally and fairly? Are the media presenting women athletes with the same kind of respect and dignity that they show for male athletes? In this paper, we will see that the answers to these questions is, “no.” This paper will look at the obstacles facing women athletes in the media through both historical and current examples, with the aim of seeing what can be done to even the playing field. Improvements for women athletes and women in sports media is possible, but it cannot depend solely on the operators of big media businesses becoming enlightened. The most potent change will come from the grassroots—from female athletes, journalists, and fans themselves.

Historical Overview: The Struggle for Inclusion

Women have never had an easy time finding their way in sports. They have put work in to be a professional athlete, and they have had to put in additional work to become respected in sports. The pioneering sports sociologist Jennifer Hargreaves organizes the history of women’s professional and high-level sports into three cultural eras. The first phase ranged from 1896 to 1928, the second from 1928 to 1952, and the third from 1952 to present. The first phase was “an era of overwhelming exclusion and dismissal of any combination of women and sport” (Billings 82). During this phase, women had a very small and rare chance of finding any involvement in

sports. The year 1900 was the first time women participated in the Olympic Games in Paris, France. They participated in just five sports: tennis, sailing, croquet, equestrian, and golf. Only 22 of the 997 athletes that year were women (International Olympic Committee). In 1912, women began to compete in swimming events, but not one single swimming athlete was from America. In this time American females were not allowed to compete in events without long skirts. Women competing in sports was very unusual during this phase, and in many cases not permitted.

The second phase was a “period when primarily ‘feminine appropriate’ sports received relatively meager forms of social attention” (Billings 82). Feminine appropriate sports are sports where women could still behave as expected, yet still be involved in athletics. Feminine sports included gymnastics and swimming, while examples of non-feminine sports were basketball and boxing (Billings). An additional feminine sport was track, one which was ground breaking for women in the 1928 Olympics. Track and field was the primary focus of female competition (Rosenfeld). However, once a woman collapsed after this race, women were no longer able to compete in distances longer than 200 meters, showing that both the types of sports, and physical activity within a sport is still limited for women. Sporting opportunities were still limited, but women started to make a name for themselves in certain sports.

During the third phase, women have been able to “conquer some traditional power structures while continuing to challenge long held stereotypes about women’s athleticism” (Billings 83). Today women have found the most opportunities in sports, and the most freedom to participate, majorly due to a very significant change that came for women’s sports in the United States in 1972. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 made gender equity into law. Title IX held that “no person in the United States shall, on the bases of sex, be excluded

from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” This law’s impact on sports was particularly felt in middle school, high school, and college athletics. In public schools and in colleges receiving federal aid (which is virtually of all them, because of federal financial aid programs), there must be a balance between the number of men and women involved in sports and the level of support that their teams receive. The official NCAA website breaks Title IX down into three parts, participation, scholarships, and other benefits. Men and women must be provided equitable opportunities to participate in sports, they must receive athletics scholarship dollars proportional to their participation, they must both receive fair benefits such as equipment and supplies, locker rooms, housing and dining services, and publicity and promotions.

Title IX has opened up so many opportunities for women involvement in sports. It forces universities to support women’s sports on an equal basis with men’s sports. This equal exposure in turn encourages more women to become involved in sports. Although progress has been made, “women often find their access to facilities, trainers, coaches, and media exposure is still lacking when compared to their male counterparts” (Billings 83). Although women are receiving the same benefits as men, some believe their benefits are still a lower quality than men’s athletics. Women are still struggling to find fair treatment, and equal representation like male athletes.

Women Ignored in Sports Media

Women’s participation in interscholastic sports, or sports that a school sponsors and are competitive in nature, is the highest it has ever been. Women’s participation in sports has grown more than 900% since 1972 (Laucella 773), and more women are still becoming involved. However, media coverage has not expanded in a corresponding fashion. On a typical episode of ESPN’s *SportsCenter*, only 2% of coverage is devoted to women’s athletics (Billings 89).

Additionally, women are 40% of all sport participants, but receive only 4% of all sports media coverage, or coverage on a typical episode of ESPN (Laucella 776). Sports editors have historically argued that they do not promote, but merely reflect a simple truth around women's sports: that audiences are not interested" (Laucella 773). Yet others argue that due to the lack of coverage, female fans appear uninterested in women's sports, when in fact, they are interested. If such sports were covered more, this side argues, then more women (and men) would follow women's sports.

The media is always going to respond the audience's response. Women are looking for a way to show that audiences are interested in women's sports, but women's sports are not receiving enough coverage for fans to express their interest. Sponsors are unwilling to finance individuals and teams that do not get good exposure – and few female athletes do ("Why Professional"). In the studies done to how many viewers are viewing women's sports, it appears that the audience do not respond well to women's coverage, so the media may be more inclined to not cover it; however, if the media covered women's sports more consistently, some argue the audience will respond better ("Why Professional"). Men's sports have been covered since the beginning, so men's sports have the platform of audiences to begin with, therefore media outlets are willing to cover them due to the media coverage successes so far. If women's sports received more consistent coverage, they may receive more interest from the audience, which would bring them more sponsors for media exposure.

Take, for examples, the media coverage of the men's and women's college basketball. During the Final Four tournament in 2017, the games sold out several arenas, Mississippi State pulled off the biggest upset in sports that year, and in every game, women were making standout plays. The news and opinion website ThinkProgress collected data from NCAA.com, ESPN.com

and ESPN television to prove the coverage discrepancies between men's and women's college basketball. The study tracked coverage during the week of March 27 to April, 2017.

ThinkProgress checked the NCAA.com website three times per day during the week, and two times per day on the weekends. It found 495 headlines about men's basketball, which was 72% of total, and only 108, or 18%, about women's basketball. Typically, there were eight men's videos featured on the NCAA home page, and *none* for women. Men's basketball made the front page 70 times, while the women's game made it just 23 times. Leading up to the women's Elite Eight games, one of the biggest games on the tournament so far, there were no stories or headlines promoting the tournament. ThinkProgress presented these additional findings:

On the NCAA website, men's basketball was three times as likely as women's basketball to be the lead image on the home page, and more than twice as likely to be featured in the top headlines. On the ESPN home page, the men's tournament was nine times as likely to land a featured spot at the top of the website, and almost three times as likely to be featured on the front page as a whole. Of the 57 ESPN television shows that ThinkProgress reviewed, 27 episodes didn't mention women's college basketball once. Only 12 episodes didn't include a single segment about men's college basketball (Gibbs).

This study compared the same sport and the same tournament at the same time for two different genders. These strikingly disparate findings lead one to the conclusion that women's sports are intentionally disparaged by sports media—and even by the collegiate leagues themselves, since NCAA.org was one of the culprits.

Broadening out from this one sport, the unequal coverage is documented throughout print and digital media. A study conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Princeton Survey Research Associates in 2005, studied 2,100 stories from the front pages of 16 newspaper sports sections. Individual women athletes were the main subject of articles 5% of the time, where men were main subjects 35% of the time. In three percent of the cases, women's teams were the focus of the article, compared to 36% for men's teams. The women athletes may have

succeeded in the same ways as men, yet they were credited less through the media.

Although there has been overall improvement in sport opportunity and media coverage since phase one, progress has been slow, and in some cases, progress may not be as good as people think. It has been found that women's coverage in some media may have actually decreased compared to prior years. A study done by Duncan and Messner (2005) suggests that the amount of coverage of women's sport on television newscasts has actually declined over the past 15 years (Martin 83). They analyzed television news programming in 2004, over a six-week period. They monitored sport coverage within the Los Angeles area including the ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates as well as ESPN's *SportsCenter* and Fox's *Southern California Sports Report* (Martin 84). They concluded that "women's sports were under-reported in the six weeks of early evening and late night television sports news on three network affiliates [KNBC, KCBS, and KABC] sampled in the study. Men's sports received 91.4% of the airtime, women's sports 6.3%, and gender-neutral topics 2.4%. These numbers indicate a decline in the coverage of women's sports since 1999, when 8.7% of the airtime was devoted to women's sports" (Martin 84). While the goal for coverage of women athletes in the media is to be consistently increasing., in some cases, the coverage for woman is decreasing.

Women Objectified in Sports Media

When women athletes do receive media coverage, they are still fighting a battle of what they are being represented as in the media. *Sports Illustrated* is a popular American sports magazine owned by the Meredith Corporation. It contains images of athletes and their sports, but keep in mind, through selling the magazine and posing for the magazine, businesses are making a source of income for the business and the athletes. It is also another source underrepresenting women athletes. In a U.S. study by Lumpkin and Williams (1991), it was found that only 8% of *Sports*

Illustrated magazines from 1954-1987 contained a feature article concerning a female sports figure (Martin 83). Throughout 1954-1987, women's sports participation was growing, yet their representation was not correlating with the growth. Lumpkin and Williams found that "3068 (88.8%) of the articles published during that time were authored by men, and 3178 (90.8%) of the feature stories were written about male sport figures. Comparatively, women wrote 157 (4.5%) of the articles, and females were the subject of 280 (8.0%) of the feature stories" (Martin 84). Additionally, women were mostly only covered when they participated in "sex-appropriate sports" such as tennis golf and swimming (Martin 84). Further into this study, it was found that the total column length (in printed newspapers) for articles regarding males was 65 inches, where articles regarding females average about 54 inches (Martin 83).

Fink and Kensicki (2002) completed a follow-up study in the late 1990s, a period when woman's participation in sports was higher than ever before. Studying *Sports Illustrated* from 1997 to 1999, they found that 862 articles contained pictures of men, while only 96 offered images of women (Martin 84)—still a drastic amount of underrepresentation. This later study further confirms a point made early by Lumpkin and Williams: that "magazine covers are significant representational sites, as they communicate a sense of cultural importance and have been historically used as a means of enticing readers into the magazine's content" (Martin 83). With underrepresentation, women are being assumed to be less important than men, because they are showcased less.

Women athletes are not only facing lack of coverage in media, but they are also facing stereotyped media representation. Although *Sports Illustrated* is a source of enjoyable media for readers, it may be shaping their ideas of women in a negative light. Media is an important outlet that can shape society's ideas as a whole. What the media wants society to think and feel, they

have the power to make that happen. Women athletes are often shown as passive figures, shown in non-competitive non-sport related poses and scenery, and are often sexualized in images.

Sports Illustrated is an example not only of underrepresentation, but of misrepresentation, because it presents women in a sexualized and passive way

For instance, Fink and Kensicki (2002) did a study of images of women compared to men in the magazine. They found that “34% of women pictured in *Sports Illustrated* were shown in athletic action, 55% were in a non-sport setting, and 5% were displayed in pornographic poses compared with 66%, 23%, and 0% respectively, for males” (Martin 86). Males were always portrayed appropriately as athletes, whereas women were more often seen to be placed in a specific pose for the camera. The authors came up with two categories into which the magazine sorted women: “dressed but poised and pretty,” and pornographic, both negative terms to associate with women athletes.

The category “dressed but poised and pretty” suggests that athletes wear suitable attire to compete in their respective sport, but are not portrayed in a way that conveys athletic action (Martin 86). “The May 19, 2008 issue of *Sports Illustrated* ... demonstrates this, as it features race car driver Danica Patrick in her racing gear, hands resting on her helmet, looking at the camera. She appears to be wearing make-up, and is not positioned near her race car” (Martin 86). The image is using Patrick’s appearance instead of her athletic ability to attract viewers.. “Such images serve to perpetuate the damaging stereotype that women still don’t belong in sport by placing them on the sidelines or periphery of a sporting context rather than directly in one” (Martin 86). Such editorial framing of images influences readers to continue believing old stereotypes.

Fink and Kensicki also categorized some photos as pornographic, which suggested that the athlete was dressed “provocatively or photographed in such a way as to focus solely on sexual attributes” (Martin 86). The females were being shown and described more for their bodies than anything else. One of the most oft-pictured athletes, track star Florence Griffith-Joyner, was regularly photographed in sexualized ways which were reinforced with text alongside the picture” (Martin 94). Duncan provides examples of phrases used to represent the star such as: “Joyner’s rapier-like, intricately painted fingernails...lavish make-up and racy one-legged running suits that emphasize the sexual” (quoted in Martin 86). The poses and the words associated with the woman are influencing the image more than the actual photo, and this is because of the way media is covering them. Using wording that enhances the images of the women, the media is hoping to draw additional attention from men, which would help accumulate more attention and money for the magazine.

What are the Core Problems?

The big question that comes next is asking why woman are still getting less coverage, and why the media is still portraying them in a stereotypical light. Male hegemony may be a reason for the lack of coverage and stereotype of women in sports. Male hegemony is the ideology that men are more deserving of dominance in sport and culture. It may sound like a strong term to use in the context of women in sports, but it is justified if it is an underlying reason for the uneven treatment. “Male hegemony is integral to the culturally ingrained gender system in the United States, which positions men as ‘rational’/cognitive, and, thus, naturally suited to control the culture for its own good. Women are positioned as the biologically grounded and domestically oriented—thus, naturally suited to being controlled” (Martin 805). Due to the idea that men overpower woman, men must be more dominant in sports than woman. The media may be

reinforcing the idea of male hegemony. It is the idea that women do not have equal opportunity for coverage, that gives us the idea that there is background attitude for a preference for males. With continued lack of coverage and non-sports related coverage, it seems as if male sports are priority and are concurrently signaling the inferiority of women's (Martin 300). The media is reinforcing trends that have been established through general ideas overtime. Maintaining the idea of male hegemony in the area of sports leads to the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of woman athletes.

Media continues to promote the ideas of woman that seem to attract the most interest. The media thinks they are finding success in the images that serve to highlight athletes' heterosexuality and conformance to traditional notions of femininity (Martin 304). Again, the media is continuing to shape the idea of male hegemony. The media assumes fans want to see big powerful men out against one another, so that is what they are going to show. Dr. Cheryl Cooky, an associate professor of American studies at Purdue University, says, "Mainstream sports media outlets are essentially 'mediated man-caves,' it's a space where men can go and know it's going to be by, for, and about men" (Ottaway). Her comments are supported by examples such as Dan Shaughnessy, a sports columnist for the *Boston Globe*, when he said that he does not believe people want to see women's sports, because women's sports aren't worth watching. He has had an influence on viewers, yet he does not think it is his responsibility to use his platform to help women athletes (Ottaway).

This then brings back the question to if women athletics were covered more, would people start to watch it more? Lindsay Gibbs, a sports reporter for ThinkProgress, explained, "You can't ignore the power structures that exist. You're dealing with huge cultural influences that still are about suppressing women and keeping them in their place, so you have to view

women's sports in that context" (Ottaway). Sports media is many things, but is also a business. Revenue is ultimately a goal, no matter what kind of reputation they are leaving for people on the line, and that is one of the biggest struggles women face to make a name for themselves, the need to bring in revenue.

Women in the sports media workforce are often found to be struggling for success due to the reputation of woman in sports. Women who enter journalism do not stay long; the average career span for women in sports is ten years (Hardin 804). Due to the dominance of men, women find it hard to succeed in their careers. Some believes that as women get "equal opportunity" in sports departments, female athletes will get more play on sports pages and in broadcasts because women sports writers, editors, and producers will ensure greater attention (Martin 804). In a 1992 study, 19 female sports journalist were interviewed, and "the women saw covering women's sports as a way to stall their careers because of the status of women's sports" (Martin 806). The business is about making money, and women felt as if they could not make money in this case because of the image of women in sports.

Proposals for Making Progress

The evidence from the previous sections is depressing for those who care about equality of opportunity for women. How, then, can women be equally covered in the media, and how can they be positively represented in the media? Some say before any type of representation of women in media is changed, the underlying issues must be addressed, one specifically being male hegemony. Jennifer Hargreaves writes that in sport, hegemony "has been more complete and more resistant to change than in other areas of culture." Increased female participation and interest "represent only superficial social change because deep-seated ideological change has not occurred" (Martin 805). The media keeps reinforcing the idea of male hegemony, sometimes just

discretely, but that keeps reinforcing this idea that does not need reinforcement. Society must change their minds first, before any ideas in sports can be changed.

Some women argue that “the antidote to exclusion of women's sports is in the hiring of more female gatekeepers, who would not be resistant to coverage of women's sport. Sports columnist Christine Brennan is one of a number of sports journalists and scholars who believe that improvement in women’s sports coverage will take place when women are added to sports departments” (Martin 806). Maybe a step in the right direction is hiring more females, yet they need to feel comfortable in their workspace. Research explores the notion that more women in newsrooms will yield better coverage for female sports by probing the attitudes and values of women in sports media (Martin 807). Some women in the survey feel a responsibility to give female sports more exposure, but women were roughly evenly divided. 44% either agreed or strongly agreed, and 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed(Martin 814). The dilemma comes when the survey found that women who work in the field do not think more women in the field would bring more coverage. If women do not believe in their power, women will not be able to make a change. “On the idea that more women in sports media would consequently bring more female sports exposure; 58% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the assertion that ‘If more women worked in sports media, women's sports would get more coverage’” (Martin 814). Women in the field may see the inequalities, may feel some responsibility, but do not see that they can change it drastically. They may also be resisting change within the media because of the current treatment they have within the workforce. They may think treatment of women in the media will not change since their treatment in the work force has not changed.

While progress is slow, some progress has been seen. In order for women in the field to change woman’s coverage, it may have to start with smaller women’s organizations. Women are

currently active in advocating more women's coverage and positive representation, in hopes of inspiring others and one day having a large impact. A famous foundation dedicated to empowering women in sports is the "Feminist Majority Foundation," which dedicates some of its efforts to female athletes. This organization was started in May 1993 by Molly Yard, former president of the National Organization for Women and a long-time women's rights and civil rights activist. Its website informs citizens of basic information about women's roles and rights in sports. It informs citizens of Title IX, women athletes in the media, and strategies that can make a change for women in media. This foundation believes in starting by giving support for women and girls in sports, and encouraging other women and girls. Bringing awareness to the problems facing women in sports is the first step in change.

It is also beneficial for younger female athletes to have professional female athletes who are trying to make a change, to look up to. Billie Jean King dominated the tennis scene from 1966 to 1975, earning 32 of her 39 Grand Slam titles during this period, including all 12 of her Grand Slam singles titles, nine of her 16 Grand Slam women's doubles titles, and 10 of her 11 Grand Slam mixed doubles titles. She held the world number one ranking in women's tennis from 1966 to 1968, from 1971 to 1972, and in 1974 (Billie Jean King Enterprises). A role model to young tennis players and athletes, King started the well-known "Women's Sports Foundation" (www.womenssportsfoundation.org), which is dedicated to creating leaders by ensuring access to sports for all girls and young women. With foundations striving to make a difference, girls have multiple ways to get involved, and with a female professional athlete as the founder, they have someone to look up to in the field of change.

The formation of Title IX marked a change for gender equality within sports, yet women are waiting for that change to spark within media. The underrepresentation, misrepresentation,

and stereotyped representations undermine the success they are having on the field. Women have opened many opportunities for themselves and other women athletes in sports, but now they continue the fight for equal coverage and accurate representation. Woman's sports are covered far less compared to men's sports. When women are portrayed, they are too often portrayed in sexualized, non-athletic settings for prurient interest of viewers. At what point will the media realize the massively negative effect it is having on these women athletes and their careers? The media is out for income, and the way they cover women seems to largely impact their income. If women sports start to be covered more, over time, women may start bringing in income that they do not currently bring. Starting with the advocates for equality for women in sport is the first step to a big change in the field.

Works Cited

- Billie Jean King Enterprises. "Greatest Female Tennis Players of All Time—Billie Jean King." www.billiejeanking.com/tennis/. Accessed November 30, 2018.
- Billings, Andrew C., and Michael L. Butterworth, and Paul D. Turman. *Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field*. Sage, 2014.
- Gibbs, Lindsey. "The Dramatic Discrepancy in Coverage between the Men's and Women's NCAA Basketball Tournaments." *ThinkProgress*, 3 April 2017, thinkprogress.org/march-madness-womens-media-coverage-4703d86ca34e/.
- Goldberg, Hannah. "Like a Girl: New Always Ad Plays on Gender Stereotypes #LikeAGirl." *Time*, 26 June 2014, time.com/2927761/likeagirl-always-female-empowerment/.
- Hardin, Marie, and Stacie Shain. "Strength In Numbers? The Experiences and Attitudes of Women in Sports Media Careers." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2005, pp. 804-819.
- International Olympic Committee. "Factsheet: Women in the Olympic Movement." January 2016, stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Reference_documents_Factsheets/Women_in_Olympic_Movement.pdf. Accessed November 30, 2018.
- Jones, Amy, and Jennifer Greer. "You Don't Look Like an Athlete: The Effects of Feminine Appearance on Audience Perceptions of Female Athletes and Women's Sports." *Journal of Sport Behavior*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 358-377.
- Jones, Ashely. "Discrepancies Apparent in Coverage of Men's and Women's College Basketball." *The Future 15*, tcujournalismworkshop.com/2018/06/discrepancies-apparent-in-coverage-of-mens-and-womens-college-basketball/.
- Laucella, Pamela C., Marie Hardin, Steve Bien-Aime, and Dunja Antunovic. "Diversifying the Sports Department and Covering Women's Sports: A Survey of Sports Editors." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2017, vol. 94, no. 3, pp. 772-792.
- Martin, Adam, and Mary G. McDonald. "Covering Women's Sport? An Analysis of *Sports Illustrated* Covers from 1987-2009 and ESPN *The Magazine* Covers from 1998-2009." *Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise & Physical Education Research*, 2012, no. 1, pp. 81-97.
- NCAA. "Title IX Frequently Asked Questions." *NCAA.org*, 27 January 2014, www.ncaa.org/about/resources/inclusion/title-ix-frequently-asked-questions#title. Accessed November 30, 2018.
- Ottaway, Amanda. "Why Don't People Watch Women's Sports?" *The Nation*, 21 July 2016, www.thenation.com/article/why-dont-people-watch-womens-sports/.

- Rosenfeld, Bobbie. "Feminine Sports Reel." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. *Encyclopedia.com*, 2018, www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/educational-magazines/feminine-sports-reel.
- Sherry, Emma, Angela Osborne, and Matthew Nicholson. "Images of Sports Women: A Review." *Sex Roles*, vol. 74, no. 7-8, 2016, pp. 299-309.
- "Why Professional Women's Sport is Less Popular than Men's." *The Economist*, 27 July 2014, www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2014/07/27/why-professional-womens-sport-is-less-popular-than-mens.