

The History of Sports Inequality and how the Pressure on Female Athletes Affects Mental Health and Performance

For centuries, sports have been a largely impactful part of society and an outlet for millions of people to escape the harsh realities of life. While sports began as recreational and leisurely, people quickly began to begin stronger competitions that paved the way to leagues, tournaments and even college and professional sports. Since the beginning of sport culture, there has always been a divide between men's and women's sports. Throughout both the recreational level and competitive, men's sports have consistently been held to a superior standard than women's. Although there have been significant momentum and increased recognition in women's athletics, female athletes have experienced immense pressure being put on them to perform and present themselves up to male athlete's existing standards. As a result of this, many female athletes have developed a variety of mental health issues, including body dysmorphia, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression that often end up having an effect on their overall athletic performance. These mental health issues are often hidden under the surface of the female athlete's image, taking a further toll on them for not being able to speak up about their struggles. Society has seen these trends especially as of late, especially within the National Collegiate Athletics Association, the Olympics, and other professional leagues. The overwhelming pressure put onto female athletes in regard to how they must perform and present themselves to keep up with societal standards has a detrimental effect on their mental health and overall athletic performance.

Prior to the year of 1970, women did not have nearly as many opportunities to participate in competitive physical activity. Most sports and activities were strictly recreational, often very

informal without rules or organization. According to one sports journal, it is stated that in the 1800s, there was a dominant belief that humans had a fixed amount of energy that could be attributed to both physical and intellectual tasks (Bell, 2016) . Because women were just starting to gain access to higher education at this time, the stigma remained that it would not be smart to let women participate in competitive sports. This was widely accepted mainly because women were thought to be “periodically weakened” during their menstruation, thus suggesting that they should not labor their muscles and brains too much. As the women’s suffrage movement began to take hold in the early 20th century, the women’s sports movement began to gain even more momentum.

In 1972, Richard Nixon passed Title IX of the Education Amendments, which claimed that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis 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” (United States Department of Justice, 2021). While the passage of Title IX made significant strides towards equality between men and women’s sports, not all organizations follow what the legislation states. Even when the legislation was first passed, the NCAA quickly became concerned with its control of intercollegiate athletics being threatened. Being that Title IX applied to college sports at all levels and “women were to be elevated to a status equal to the men, its financial assets and political power were threatened” (Bell, 2016). Still today, we see organizations threatened by this call for equality.

March Madness is one of the NCAA’s biggest revenue-producing events that it holds for college basketball each year. This past year during the Coronavirus pandemic, all of the teams

for the men's and women's college basketball tournament were sent to "bubbles" where they were kept from the outside world so that it was a COVID-19 free zone. In Indiana, where the men's tournament was held, teams arrived to "well-supplied facilities and the full marketing might of the March Madness brand", while the women's tournament arrived to "lightly stocked workout areas and competition venues so underwhelming that a top coach suggested they resembled sites for high school games" (Blinder, 2021). Unlike the men's tournament, the women's tournament was held in Texas. It was further addressed that the NCAA spent about eighty dollars more per male player than they did for their female counterparts. This disappointing display of inequality quickly was exploited on social media, bringing it the attention female athletes participating in the tournament felt they deserved. Even with all of the progress made towards equality for women in sports, this is just one instance of female athletics being ignored.

A second major example of this continued inequality is the issues with equal pay for the United States Women's National Soccer Team. Megan Rapinoe, a star player for the U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT), has played a huge role in the gender-discrimination lawsuit against the USSF in 2019. She has consistently been an outspoken advocate for equal opportunities for women in sports. While the USWNT has been largely successful on the soccer field, more so than the male team, the overseeing organization was overlooking the gender pay issues for years. Rapinoe, as well as some of her other teammates, had been fighting this exhausting battle against discrimination for years. Upon her visit to the White House in March of 2021, she stated "one cannot simply outperform inequality or be excellent enough to escape discrimination of any kind" (Boren & Bieler, 2021). She further spoke about the toll it has taken

on her, saying she “has been devalued, [she’s] been disrespected and dismissed because [she] is a woman” (Boren & Bieler, 2021). This discrimination within even the highest level of elite sports was felt greatly by Rapinoe and her teammates to be belittling to women and diminishing to their feelings of self-worth.

Off of the field, social media is another big contributor to inequalities between men’s and women’s sports. On one hand, social media is a great way to call attention to these gender issues within sports and allow some female athletes to be painted as strong role models for younger children. On the other, it can cause even more attention to be drawn to the differences in how female athletes and male athletes are viewed, and often times women’s sports end up being underrepresented. By having a lack of coverage of woman’s sports, television networks and streaming services send a message to sport consumers that women’s sports are not as important or worthy of coverage as men’s sports. This can create preconceived notions in viewer’s minds that female athletes and their competitions do not have as much value as their male counterparts. In a study of Sports Illustrated covers over 34 years, less than 5% of the covers were of sportswomen (Trolan, 2013). Media outlets are more likely to cover female athletes when they are performing in sports or activities that are deemed appropriate for them by society. Furthermore, “authors found that nearly twice as much airtime went to women’s non-contact individual sports” and “women playing appropriate gender related sports had the highest coverage” (Trolan, 2013). Female athletes that choose to participate in male appropriated sports that are typically more aggressive, such as wrestling or rugby, are typically not represented because they “challenge the traditional sex role stereotype and are therefore excluded from coverage because of their failure to conform” (Trolan, 2013). Women in sports are expected to

succeed in their sport, but also support and maintain something described as the “female/athlete paradox” (Paloian, 2021). This paradox expects that sportswomen exist in a very small margin of acceptable femininity; society wants to see women in sports because it is “empowering”, but at the same time, female athletes must maintain a feminine composition, otherwise their actions and appearance are “disempowering” (Paloian, 2021). The ideologies that are created by this polarization leads society associating athleticism with muscularity, which is then attributed to masculinity. Therefore, any women who participate in more aggressive sports experiences a severe double standard and is seen as unladylike.

Traditional patriarchal views that have been threaded through athletics for centuries are still very prevalent in the media, specifically when it comes to the notion that “Western culture is the embodiment of masculinity and that the feminine ideal body contrasts with the idea of what it means to be a female athlete” (Trolan, 2013). The standard for women in sports often contradicts itself, demanding women to be competitive and strong like male athletes, but also still feminine, pretty, graceful, and in line with traditional beauty standards. In other words, sports media often aligns with the concept that “women are women first and an athlete second” (Trolan, 2013) which completely trivializes them as elite athletes. In a 1988 study by Duncan and Hasbrook, when mistakes were made in athletic competition, it was attributed to “emotional difficulties” for women, but simply “unfortunate luck” for men (Trolan, 2013). This exaggerates the portrayals of these women in the media, tearing their image down to make them seem inferior to male athletes. Through articles, posts, and media stories, “women’s sport is marginalized and often presented to reinforce gender stereotypes (Gallardo, 2021). Their value is undermined by the media, making their image seem less significant than others. The oversexualization of women in sports is seen

in both print media and social media, focusing more on the hair, make-up, and body shape aspect than the actual sports context. The physical appearance of female athletes was rendered much more important than their athletic skills and abilities (Trolan, 2013). This exploitation of female athletes' bodies to get media coverage opens up the doors for criticism and degradation, resulting in severe body image and mental health issues for female athletes who are only trying to prove themselves worthy and equal to a male athlete's media image.

Generally speaking, sports are viewed by society as an outlet to relieve stress and escape the troubles of reality. However, for many female athletes, making the decision to participate in elite sports can actually have the reverse effect. In the past, many experts and scientists have emphasized focus on female physiology in competitive sports rather than the mental health aspect (Heuss, 2020). While physical health and ability are essential aspects of a woman's performance in sport, mental health plays a critical role that cannot be ignored or overlooked. If the mental health and emotional well-being of an athlete fails or falters, physical performance can be greatly affected.

When speaking about mental health in athletics, the International Society of Sport Psychology claims that it is "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (Perry, 2021). Women in sports can often be "victims of stereotyping in the sports industry, not only being exposed to excessive sexism, discrimination, and disrespect toward female athletes, but also suffering from structural and financial inequalities such as lack of airtime on television" (Heuss, 2020). Having to constantly deal with the pressures of proving that you belong in athletics can be a tiring and

excruciating task. Not only are female athletes stressed by the competitive nature of their respective sport, but now many of them have the added pressure to live up to the standard that has been forced upon them by gender ideologies and scrutiny. These factors render lots of stress for the female athlete, causing feelings of burnout, anxiety, depression, and inferiority.

Additionally, “emotional strains and illnesses in sport may have an influence on the performance, may increase the risk for injury and may lengthen rehabilitation” (Heuss, 2020). At one point or another, a tipping point in some female athletes is reached, which is when mental health issues really start to affect them.

The most common mental illnesses that are seen within female athletes are depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. In a meta-analysis of athletes, it was concluded that “female athletes were significantly more likely to report anxiety than male athletes” and when looking at depression rates of competitive college student athletes “female athletes have 1.32 greater odds of being depressed” (Herrero, 2021). The prevalence of this anxiety and depression in female athletes is worrisome, specifically because it correlates to their performance and injury rates. In 2017, a study found that “female athletes who were anxious sustained sports-related injuries at a rate that was 1.9 times higher than that found for female athletes who did not report anxiety symptoms” (Herrero, 2021). Furthermore, these athletes often may experience a domino effect once they are injured, meaning that the psychological issues they experience during injury treatment and rehabilitation could impair and delay recovery. In recent studies, it was reported that many female athletes struggle with returning from injury due to mental health issues, warranting a greater risk of persistent symptoms after sustaining an injury. Along the same line, female athletes with depression and anxiety, whether existing prior to injury or developing

during injury recovery, experienced many psychosocial barriers that included comparison to other athletes with similar injury and uncertainty regarding return to competition (Herrero, 2021). Often female athletes experience sources of self-identity that is “linked to the appearance and athleticism of their bodies” and when they become injured as a result of other mental struggles, it can be devastating to their body satisfaction. Because of this, many female athletes fall into a state of vulnerability that could lead to disordered eating and dieting, furthering the length of their recovery (Herrero, 2021). Once trends of disordered eating are established in a female athlete’s routine, it becomes very dangerous and often is hard to remove oneself from.

In many sports such as gymnastics and swimming, female athlete’s bodies are put on display, forcing them to conform to societal beauty standards in fear of being judged. A metaanalysis of twenty-four studies by Carly Perry published in 2021 explored a scoping review of how the athletes that compete at the elite level are exposed to mental illness risk factors such as intense performance demands, rigorous training, and media attention. They found that these factors contributed to female athletes displaying characteristics of bulimia, anorexia nervosa, and disorders comorbid with anxiety and depression (Perry, 2021). After seeing the unrealistic expectations set for them by society, “around 70% of girls aged 18 to 30 don’t like their bodies” (Gallardo, 2021). While some may argue that social media has the power to effect both male and female athletes, “female athletes may disproportionately suffer from the negative effects of body image portrayed through social media” (Herrero, 2021). When these negative body image trends begin to really effect these female athletes, there is a strong correlation with negative mental health and poor physical health.

In a blog published by Luis Gallardo through the World Happiness Foundation, he states that “if an athlete thinks that she is not strong, pretty, or skinny enough, she might take unhealthy steps to change her physical appearance”. According to a study that looked at the factors relating to the onset of eating disorders in female collegiate athletes compared to non-athletes, one thing that stood out in the study was that female athletes had a lot higher risk for eating disorders because of the “unique pressure to perform in athletics”. They explained that they felt immense pressure from society, coaches, peers, and family to not only perform well, but fit into specific body images that were synonymous with their sport. The study stemmed directly from female athletes who wanted to share how the pressure put on them by being a competitive athlete directly affected their mental health (Arthur-Cameselle, 2011). As stated above, these mental health issues are important to address because it can seriously affect how female athletes are able to perform in their sport.

McCallum Place is an eating disorders center that also has a website with blog entries from doctors explaining different aspects of eating disorders and how they can affect certain individuals. In one particular entry, Dr. Ron Thompson speaks about how eating disorders affect sports performance, specifically in female athletes. While many athletes are able to perform for periods of time without seeing the effects of their eating disorders, eventually the negative habits their illnesses exhibit will catch up to them. He writes, “the disorder will eventually result in poor performance due to dehydration, (early) glycogen depletion, muscle weakness, and a host of other physical/medical factors, not to mention the numerous psychological issues” (Thompson, 2014). Aside from it being detrimental to their performance, these issues are downright dangerous for female athletes. Another issue that comes from eating disorders, specifically for

women, is that it often results in irregularities in their menstrual cycles. A common misconception within female athletes themselves is that their menstrual cycles interfere with athletic training and must not be important because many of their teammates choose to stop their cycles. In a study of female swimmers in 2014, the athletes were separated based on menstrual function. During the test period, “sports performance declined by 9.8% in the ovarian-suppressed group while it increased by 8.2% in the cyclic menstrual function group” (Thompson, 2018). The need for adequate health is extremely important for female athletes to reach their full potential.

In recent years, many female athletes have started to be more outspoken on their mental health struggles, especially in elite sports. This past year, two extremely well-known female athletes, Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka and United States Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, have struggled so much with mental health issues because of their sport that they made the decision to pull out of competition. This June, Osaka was set to compete in the French Open. After her first round victory, Naomi pulled herself from a news conference because she “experienced anxiety before speaking to the media and revealed she suffered bouts of depression” (Gleeson, 2021). Instead of the organizations being understanding that Osaka was under too much pressure and strain, she was “threatened by all four Grand Slam tournaments with the possibility of disqualification or suspension if she continued to avoid the media” (Gleeson, 2021). Not only does the sports world put so much pressure that female athletes are having these mental health issues, but now they are being scrutinized for speaking out about them. Simone Biles had a similar situation during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics that took place in the summer of 2021. Biles had been struggling mentally for a while in her gymnastics career, which was only heightened by all of the news surrounding the sexual assault cases against

United States Gymnastics. She was an overwhelming favorite to win multiple gold medals in individual and all-around events and was even seen as being able to lead her team to a gold in the overall team competition. In the middle of competition, Biles “lost herself in midair” (Maine, 2021), something that is extremely dangerous in the sport of gymnastics. She admitted that “the mental [was] not there” (Maine, 2021) and proceeded to pull herself out of the all-around and team events. The stress put onto Biles felt in her words like “the weight of the world on her shoulders” (Maine, 2021), which should never be the case when you are doing something that you love. Both Biles’ and Osaka’s withdrawals from competition are evidence of the pressures put on female athletes and how their mental state is affected by it.

While physical health is a big part of female athletes and their performance, mental health is also an extremely important factor. The pressures that society puts on female athletes to constantly prove themselves equal to men, uphold their feminine image, and still be successful renders many female athletes to develop anxiety, depression, and eating disorders that will either cause harm to their performance, increase the likelihood of injury, or make them pull out of competition completely. As more elite female athletes are bringing conversations about the pressures they face and their mental health to the forefront, hopefully it will inspire change in sports culture and organizations to bring sports back to the stress-reliever we once saw it as.

References

Arthur-Cameselle, J. N., & Quatromoni, P. A. (2011). Factors related to the onset of eating disorders reported by female collegiate athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 25(1), 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.25.1.1>

Bell, R. C. (2016, October 12). *A history of women in sport prior to title IX*. The Sport Journal. Retrieved October 25, 2021, from <https://thesportjournal.org/article/a-history-of-women-in-sport-prior-to-title-ix/>.

Blinder, A. (2021, August 3). *Report: N.C.A.A. prioritized men's basketball 'over everything else'*. The New York Times. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/sports/ncaabasketball/ncaa-gender-equityinvestigation.html>.

- Boren, C., & Bieler, D. (2021, March 24). *At White House, Megan Rapinoe says she's been 'disrespected and dismissed because I am a woman'*. The Seattle Times. Retrieved November 10, 2021, from <https://www.seattletimes.com/sports/megan-rapinoe-tellshouse-committee-on-equal-pay-day-one-cannot-simply-outperform-inequality/>.
- Gallardo, L. (2021, September 5). *The importance of mental health in women's sports*. World Happiness Foundation. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://worldhappiness.foundation/blog/community/the-importance-of-mental-health-inwomen-sports/>.
- Gleeson, S. (2021, July 8). *Naomi Osaka says 'it's OK to not be OK'; standing up for Mental Health 'all worth it'*. USA Today. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/tennis/2021/07/08/naomi-osaka-opens-up-frenchopen-withdrawal-mental-health/7899251002/>.
- Herrero, C. P., Jejurikar, N., & Carter, C. W. (2021). The psychology of the female athlete: How mental health and wellness mediate sports performance, injury and Recovery. *Annals of Joint*, 6, 38–38. <https://doi.org/10.21037/aoj-20-53>
- Heuss, S., Ricardo, S. A., & Christian, C. M. (2020). Sports psychiatry. women's mental health in elite sports – we are missing the complexity. (2020). *Sports & Exercise Medicine Switzerland*. <https://doi.org/10.34045/sems/2020/42>
- Maine, D. A. (2021, July 28). *Simone Biles withdraws from individual all-around gymnastics competition at Tokyo olympics to focus on mental well-being*. ESPN. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from

https://www.espn.com/olympics/gymnastics/story/_/id/31902290/simone-bileswithdraws-individual-all-competition-tokyo-olympics-focus-mental-health.

Paloian, A. (2021). *THE FEMALE/ATHLETE PARADOX: MANAGING TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY*. Applied Psychology OPUS. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from https://wp.nyu.edu/steinhardt-appsych_opus/the-femaleathleteparadox-managing-traditional-views-of-masculinity-and-femininity/.

Perry, C., Champ, F. M., Macbeth, J., & Spandler, H. (2021). Mental Health and Elite Female Athletes: A scoping review. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 56, 101961.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.101961>

Thompson, R., & Place, M. C. (2018, March 15). *How eating disorders affect sports performance*. McCallum Place Eating Disorder Center. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.mccallumplace.com/about/blog/eating-disorders-affect-sportsperformance/>.

Title IX. The United States Department of Justice. (2021, August 12). Retrieved November 10, 2021, from <https://www.justice.gov/crt/title-ix>.

Trolan, E. J. (2013). The impact of the media on gender inequality within Sport. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 91, 215–227. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.420>