

**Women's Representation in Sports News Media:
A Changing Landscape**

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Abstract

We have seen the social construction of gender played out across the political spectrum for centuries and in sport it's no different. Over the course of the last thirty years, the amount of research conducted on women's sports representation in news media is abounding. Much of the focus has been on how sports news media reproduces, legitimates, and challenges ideologies of gender and femininity. Research on gender in sports participation and coverage provides evidence that media is primarily male dominated and produced by men, for men and about men. (Bruce, 2012) Through this narrative, the historical connection of sport to men and masculinity is reinforced.

Media representation is important because the information that is conveyed tells the public who and what matters and in what ways they matter. Sport instills confidence, leadership, trust, and teamwork all of which are helpful on the field or the court, but are applicable in the classroom, in the boardroom, and in society at large as well. If the landscape continues to place the importance of the male athlete over the female athlete, society will continue to believe that women and girls are inferior. This can have compounding effects that undermine the value of young girls and women in every aspect of society including education, home, and work life. Legislative changes such as the enactment of the 19th Amendment and Title IX provided some footing for women's sports to take hold. However, gendered assumptions continue to marginalize women in sport and media.

This investigation will provide a historical overview of women in sport and highlight the gendered assumptions that defined their participation. It will then shed light on some of the gendered assumptions that still dominate the landscape today through an analysis of women's sports media representation. In addition, it will provide evidence to a shifting media landscape: one that recognizes and values women's achievements and newsworthiness.

Introduction

The history of women in sport in the United States was shaped by Victorian ideals and other belief systems that came from Europe and Britain. During the second half of the 19th century, industrialization and urbanization resulted in more time, money and resources for the middle and upper classes. More people participated in leisure and recreation activities, with sport being the predominant aspect of this evolution. Class and gender were convenient variables of social control, and we see the different privileges prescribed to men and women played out in sport. Only women of the upper middle class and the elites could participate in sport because they had the time, money, and resources to do so. Up until the early 1900's, golf, archery and croquet were the only sports to gain social acceptance because they weren't too strenuous on the female body. (McCrone, 1991) Even then, sport was only available to girls and women informally through school physical education programs, recreation leagues, or scheduled 'play days'. Society consistently discouraged women's participation in sports and in many ways, it developed alongside a path quite like that of the segregated south before *Brown vs. Board of Education*. That is separate, and not equal. (Ware, 2015)

During this time, sport had always been viewed as a gender specific endeavor. Competitive sports were not considered compatible with society's stereotyped image of how females should behave. In fact, masculinity became synonymous with athletics. Thus, sports represent the antithesis of what women are supposed to be and athleticism became a detriment to the female image. (Harris, 1980) Because masculinity and femininity are seen as opposites, any woman who participated in sport was considered unfeminine. (Kane, 1988) The idea then that a woman could not be both beautiful and athletic, or strong and pretty dominated the discourse. This also shaped the popular belief that women's bodies were inherently different from, and weaker than, men's bodies. (Ware, 2015) In addition, medical experts believed that women's bodies couldn't handle the demands of exercise and that intense competition would either result in a more masculine figure or make a woman ill-suited for childbearing. It wasn't just women who were stereotyped. During sport, once girls reached adolescence, they were often told to pin up their hair, lengthen their skirts, or start acting more feminine. (Ware, 2015) Thus, challenging what it meant to be a female and an athlete at the same time. The emphasis was placed on a values system that promoted and maintained sexual stereotypes.

The mid 1800's sparked the advent of the women's movement, which challenged the historical perception of women's roles and attributes. Since that time, women had been organizing under the basic desire to bring about equality within the social framework. The women's suffrage movement, which began in the late 19th century, resulted in decades of marching, lobbying, and protesting for women's rights. While not overtly obvious, there is a political dimension to sport and the same rationales that held women back politically also held them back in sport. In 1920, a radical change to the constitution was made with the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, giving women the right to vote. This new freedom for women provided modest gains for women in sports. Tennis and golf were viewed as socially sanctioned sports because they were

deemed “feminine” or sex appropriate. (Kane, 1988) As such, they were the first two sports to enter the professional sphere for women, in the 1950’s and 70’s respectfully.

In 1972, with enough momentum surrounding the women’s movement, Title IX emerged making it illegal to discriminate against female participation in sports at federally funded schools. This generated a huge wave of optimism regarding the social acceptability of women in sport. Just ten years after its implementation, the number of women participating in sport increased sixfold to 1.8 million. (Kane, 1988) With expanded opportunities for young girls and women, there was a feeling that previous stigmas regarding women’s athletics would dissipate. An excerpt from Vogue magazine shares the optimism best.

Women athletes may show us ordinary women how to shout “I’m the greatest” without feeling feminine guilt. Athletic champions represent a new breed of women, a breed unafraid to be that strong, that tough (Lichenstein, 1981, p. 458).

Despite the increase in participation, women still were not receiving much support or public attention. There were still lingering attitudes that women’s sports just were not exciting or nearly as interesting as men’s. In addition, Title IX did not require equality within the professional sphere which made it difficult to attract financial backing. As a result, female athletes were still practically self-taught, getting by on raw talent alone. There was no funding for equipment or clothing. Female athletes were forced to wear men’s shoes in smaller sizes or jerseys that were cut for men (Ware, 2015). In 1999, the US Women’s National Soccer team won the World Cup, and every single player on that team had a full-time job. There was no money and no support in women’s athletics. And while the image of Brandi Chastain celebrating in her sports bra after her winning goal became front page on nearly every newspaper and magazine across the country, it was a sad moment because visibility at that scale would rarely be seen again in women’s sports. It seems accurate to say that Title IX did not diminish the social stigmas that were associated with women’s athletics, nor did it provide female athletes with equal attention or representation.

The Problem

Ingrained assumptions about gender and sport, the systematic nature of sports news, and the varying media landscape all play a role in the media’s representation of women in sport. Imperative to this discussion is the key idea that as soon as women’s value is recognized in sport, we will see the industry shift. Female athletes want to tell their own stories, the fans want to hear them, and the fans will show their support in profound ways. A more steady and diverse media representation that encompasses moments of athleticism, triumph, heroism, defeat, lifestyle, and fashion through storytelling are key if we are to continue the momentum forward towards a more equitable and productive media framework.

Discussion

Gendered and Sexist Coverage

Years of research into media coverage has supported the assumption that women are constrained within a narrow range of reasonings regarding sport and masculinity. Sports news media, for a majority of the 80's and 90's, had been under the assumption that men like to think of women as sexual objects of desire. (Bruce, 2012) And by using sexist language in reporting or commentary, the news media might garner a larger audience or interest. *Maxim*, for example, very clearly indicated what they deemed important when they shared an article titled "The 10 Hottest Female Athletes of the Rio Games" with the subheading of "Even if the games themselves prove to be lackluster, we'll still have something to keep our eyes on." In addition, it was common in reporting to hear women referred to as 'girls', 'motherly', 'pregnant', or 'striving,' all of which regard the woman's gender above her athleticism. (Fox, 2021) The use of a word like striving also points to a sense of inferiority or struggle. It erases the notion that women can be strong and capable. Thus, it juxtaposes women's physical skill, strength, or competence against traditional femininity, weakness, and inferiority. Because competitively participating in sports is inconsistent with society's prescribed female role, the media tends to emphasize other aspects of their femininity, such as their attractiveness or physical traits. (Bruce, 2012) And while overt sexism has declined, women's coverage still is not respectful in the quality of coverage. For example, in the 2016 Olympics, an NBC affiliate reported on how Gold Medalist Katie Ledecky kept her nail polish 'chip free' in the pool. (Allegretti, 2016)

In addition, coverage appears to normalize culturally valued men's sports as the ideal to which women's sports should be judged and regarded. For example, a reporter referred to Simone Biles, one of the best gymnasts of all time, as the 'Female Michael Jordan'. While this statement may have been intended to flatter her, it just reinforces male superiority. (Bruce, 2015) We often see this played out in the headlines of lead stories like when the *Chicago Tribune* tweeted "Wife of a Bears' lineman wins a bronze medal today in Rio Olympics". Her name is Corey Cogdell and she is a two-time Olympic bronze medalist. Or when Michael Phelps' silver medal tie in the 100 fly made the headlines over Katie Ledecky's world record setting win in the 800 freestyle. It is no surprise that men seem to make their way into every story or conversation. A study by Cambridge University Press revealed that when the media talks about sports, they are three times more likely to be talking about men. (Elsesser, 2016) As such, women are marginalized because of either their difference, inferiority, or relationship to men.

Quality and Quantity of Women's Coverage

The news media and broadcasting agencies play a large role in perpetuating gender inequality in sport through the quantity and quality of airtime they give to women's sports. Historically, sports media has done an inadequate job at giving visibility to women's sports. Cheryl Cooky, a researcher and professor of American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Purdue University, conducted a 30-year study on women's sports coverage. She found that since 1989, total coverage has increased a meager .4%, from 5% to 5.4%. In addition, of the two hundred and fifty-one

broadcasts that were analyzed in 2019, only five (2% of total) opened with a story on women's sports and all five were in the month of July focusing on the United States Women's National Team (USWNT) winning the World Cup. In fact, when you remove the coverage of the women's World Cup, women's media coverage dropped to just 3.5% of all airtime. (Cooky, 2021)

This is a trend that we see amongst reporting. Coverage of women's sports isn't cyclical. Women tend to only gain visibility when they compete on an international stage and are successful. Take for instance, gymnastics. It is one of the most popular televised events of the summer Olympics and that means it's one of the most visible women's sports. But coverage only comes around every four years. This places a lot of pressure on the athletes to perform. With that level of exposure, and endorsement opportunities that are fleeting, female gymnasts are placed under extreme pressure that can ultimately affect their mental and physical health. Simone Biles dropped out of the competition in the 2020 Olympics saying she felt the "weight of the world on her shoulders." While this moment stands out as a way to redefine female power in sports, it also points to the flaws in a media system that has always favored men and masculinity.

A study done by University of Southern California researchers found that women's sports are talked about with much less enthusiasm and excitement and are often portrayed as rather boring, uneventful, and uninspiring. (Linan, 2017). In 2014 during the Women's NCAA Basketball Tournament, rather than reporting on the games, ESPN's *Sportscenter* aired a 55 second video about a stray dog. At that time, there were days when the tournament was never even reported on. (Linan, 2017) The media continually relegates female athletes to the sidelines under the assumption that nobody really cares about women's sports. In doing so, they suppress the reality of the highly accomplished entity that is women's sports. In truth, the media is constructing their own interpretation of what is important. Sports media in general might defend themselves and say they have had to deal with shrinking budgets and staff layoffs. And to play it safe, their coverage tends to focus on the "big three" which includes men's football, baseball, and basketball because that's where the money and audience are at. (Kane, 2013)

Counter to the media's assumption, fans are paying to engage with women's sports through subscriptions and swag sales. *The Athletic*, for instance, became a top media outlet for women's sport fans to read and learn about teams and athletes and it operates behind a paywall. In March of 2020, the National Women's Soccer League signed a deal with CBS and 100% of their games were available to view through different channels. Viewership increased 475% and social media engagement saw a 15% increase. It is important to note that level of engagement doesn't just happen on game day. Following the USWNT fourth FIFA World Cup win in 2019, Nike jersey sales increased fivefold. (Sports Innovation Lab, 2021) Loyal fans want to represent their communities and the athletes that they care about and will pay to do so. There is a huge market opportunity here for athletes, brands, and investors alike to shift the production and distribution of women's sports media and it all starts with the athletes and their stories.

Social Media Tries and Fails

Where traditional media outlets have been criticized for their sexist, gendered, and unequal representation of women in sport, new forms of digital media provide a hopeful counter of visibility that have the potential to challenge the dominant frameworks. In 2012, the London Olympics was dubbed the first social media games, providing a venue for fans to celebrate and share the most memorable moments from their favorite teams and athletes. (Creedon, 2014) This new media landscape drastically changed the coverage of the Olympics and made it more widely accessible. Every country represented in the games had female athletes with women competing in 26 different sports. The United States even had more women competing than men that year. The New York Times dubbed 2012 the "Year of The Women" and the International Olympic Committee's President Jacques Rogge said, "This is a major boost for gender equality." (Creedon, 2014) It's taken women over a century of struggle to get to this point. The first modern Olympics were held in 1896 and women were completely barred from competition. Therefore, this moment felt primed for the recognition and celebration of women's equal participation in sport.

Despite a wildly successful games for women, controversies arose around gendered and sexist coverage with social media serving up most of it. Gabby Douglas, a gold medal gymnast, increased her fan base by 3,960 percent thanks to social media. Yet, despite her success, she was ridiculed by her fans on Facebook and Twitter for the state of her hair. (Brown, 2012) And even with tens of thousands of tweets about the game winning goal that led the USWNT to dominate Japan in the gold medal match, news headlines reported on the women's athletic attire at the beach volleyball competition. These stunning achievements are denigrated by racial and gendered stereotypes.

Reflections reveal that within the new social media landscape, audience feedback and preferences influence the news construction process. This new digital era has destabilized the gatekeeping role of journalists and as a result, information dissemination is rather unwieldy. Sharing features and functions allow users to share stories through social channels that they help to facilitate. (Tandoc, 2015) These preferences and new forms of information sharing and engagement can and do influence journalistic decisions, whether good or bad, as we have seen played out in the 2012 Olympics. Important to providing an equally visible and celebrated platform for women's sports is a better understanding of how to best use social media as a positive and amplified voice for women.

The Solution

How the Landscape is Changing

As we have seen, investigations into sports news media and women's representation are complicated ones. Centuries of gendered and sexist stereotypes have limited the playing field for women and subsequently, their visibility and support. In recent years, female athletes, fans, and coaches are advocating for change and their

voices won't go unheard. As digital media continues to diversify, people are finding more outlets for news and stories and are experimenting with new types of coverage to ultimately give women a stronger, louder, and more visible and consistent voice. (Springer, 2019) Young athletes, especially Generation Z, are emerging as leaders and advocates, using social media to challenge the outdated ideas of what it means to be a female and an athlete at the same time. Through social media particularly, female athletes have opened up about issues that matter to them that transcend the court and the field. (Press Trust, n.p.) This is important because as a society, we are changing. Media needs to reflect that change as well.

Women and girls are feeling more empowered every day to construct an identity that screams feminine and powerful. Storytelling becomes a necessary consideration for female athletes looking to overcome marginalization and discrimination because it allows the athlete to craft herself in branded ways that are authentic and true. Because women have historically been underpinned by a patriarchal gaze from the media, personal branding and crafting can delegitimize that construct. There is no better way to do this than through storytelling.

According to a recent report put out by The Fan Project, fans of women's sports want access to athletes and to learn more about them. Fans are looking for content that not only profiles their athleticism, but lifestyle and fashion as well to gain deeper insight into the athlete as a whole person. This desire to engage has grown exponentially, reaching an all-time high during the midst of the pandemic in 2020. (Sports Innovation Lab, n.p.) Sue Bird, a four-time WNBA champion and five-time Olympic gold medalist told Nieman Reports' Shira Springer (2019, n.p.),

"When you know the backstories of players, of teams, of leagues, and those stories are told, people are more likely to latch on. I just don't know that our stories are told. I think our lives are these big mysteries and you can see it in all the misconceptions that are out there about who we are, what we do, what we ask for, what we don't ask for, how much money we make, how much money we don't make, everything across the board."

In October 2017, *Outside Magazine* started a regular feature called "Badass Women Chronicles" that appears online. Their stories chronicle the lives and accomplishments of elite women athletes today, as well as those from the mid nineteenth and twentieth centuries who pursued athletic excellence despite prescribed gender roles and stereotypes. For example, *Outside* featured Gertrude Ederle, who swam the notorious English Channel in 1926, beating the times of all the men who swam before her by a whopping two hours, and in a violent storm. At this time, women and young girls were not commonly taught to swim and women's swim leagues were in their early infancy. Gertrude had struggled with a hearing impairment all her life that made her feel socially awkward. She found peace and happiness in the water and she proved that 21 miles in inclement weather was no challenge too extreme. (Siber, 2021) This story speaks to a few of the benefits of equal access to sport. For one, women are just as capable physically and mentally as men. And two, sport can have profound

effects on a person's life, no matter their gender. *Outside Magazine* commits to two stories a month featuring badass women and their accomplishments.

TOGETHXR and Storytelling

TOGETHXR, a new media and ecommerce site that launched in early 2021 is dedicated to shining a light on women's sports. Founders Alex Morgan, Sue Bird, Chloe Kim and Simone Manuel are world class Olympic athletes with the accolades to prove it. Despite such resounding success, each athlete shares a similar story. That is, their stories are not getting heard. The founders of TOGETHXR are filling what they believe to be a content desert with beautiful, engaging, and real stories of women and girl athletes. The best part is the athletes tell the stories their way. This level of control has never been seen before in women's sports.

Through three main content buckets, TOGETHXR taps into different markets and engages with different audiences. For example, their social media channels like Instagram and TikTok provide short and quick athlete highlights and memes. These bits are entertaining enough to capture attention but short enough not to lose it. TikTok is their most successful engagement channel right now and the most interesting part, the viewership is equal parts male and female. This is a key finding. Having the voice and support of male allies will be instrumental in breaking down the assumptions and constructs that have historically defined sports news media. Their YouTube channel features more episodic, short form stories that incorporate athlete stories and brand partnerships both subtly and tastefully. When a brand partners with other organizations, they tell the world that there is value and market potential in that partnership. Their top tier market includes more long form, documentary style, highly produced films that are sold to streaming companies. This further proves that women's stories are worth sharing.

Chief Content Officer for TOGETHXR told CNN's Mack (2021), "This brand is certainly for this generation, it's for our co-founders and their teammates, and this collective women's sports landscape, but it's really for the next generation... It's so young girls can see themselves reflected in the stories that we tell, that they have a place to go that feels like they're bigger than themselves, gives them something to aspire to, and to be seen and heard and recognized." It is obvious that women's coverage just is not there, despite more and more young girls and women playing sports. Young girls need heroes and role models to look up to. By bringing visibility to high profile female athletes, TOGETHXR begins to break down the discourse that has historically devalued women in sport while giving something for the younger generation to aspire to. (Minsberg, 2021)

There's something for everyone on TOGETHXR's channels. On YouTube, for instance, you'll find a mini-series on Chantel Navarro, a young girl who comes from a long line of boxing prodigies, who has a dream to become a 2x gold medal boxer, and a short from US Women's Soccer star Alex Morgan on becoming a mother to her daughter Charlie. Katelyn Ohashi opens up about her life as a gymnast, an artist, a poet, and a cat mom. And Sydel Curry-Lee shares what it's like to be the sister of Seth

and Steph Curry but more than that, a daughter, wife, vintner, mental health advocate, and lifestyle content creator. Everyone of these tells a story. All these stories encompass a range of individual characteristics that move beyond just the individual's worth as an athlete. TOGETHXR does a beautiful job at showcasing a more holistic representation of the female athlete.

Summary

Women's representation in sports news media is menial at that. Gendered stereotypes and the nature of sports news perpetuates a cycle that objectifies women, commonly compares women to men, and trivializes women's sports. While there has been little change in the quality and quantity of coverage over the last thirty years, the emergence of a new media landscape is providing an outlet for female voices to radiate in sport. Storytelling has become by far the most important next step for women's representation in sport. By forming and strengthening athletic and individual identities through story, women diversify the conversation and the idea of what it means to be an athlete and a woman. In turn, they weaken and shatter the somewhat fixed constructs that have dominated the landscape for decades.

No doubt this new level of visibility for female athletes will provide inspiration and instill confidence in young girls and women in their pursuit of both athletic excellence and life success. Navigating the digital media landscape though can be tricky. It will be important to have a clear understanding of the athlete, the intended audience, and the roles they both play in the news construction process. The shift to digital storytelling is quite new for women and there is limited information on the success of such a transition. However, recent reports suggest and showcase the demand for increased women's coverage, news, and insights and the market opportunities that exist as a result.

Call to Action

Female athletes are demanding more representation in sports news media and more agency in the stories being told about them. Prioritizing storytelling will be key moving forward, whether short form or long form. There must be a willingness to invest time and resources in stories that are comprehensive of not only the athletic accomplishments of women, but their personal pursuits and interests as well. Media must be willing to give women a voice.

Media agencies need to re-work their business model and invest in women's sports by giving them proper airtime that is consistent, informed, and exciting. Gone are the days of sexist and bland commentary. Women are not the same as men and they do not play the same as men play. It will be imperative for reporters and commentators to understand the nuances and complexities of the women's game. This new model must focus on diversifying the newsrooms. Hire women. Hire former female athletes. Hire women who love the game but have never played. Women have a unique voice and experience that will undoubtedly bring a new lens and new voice to the discussion.

As an audience, follow social media. Support websites that are giving women a voice. Call out news organizations or social media sites that are belittling, objectifying, or infantilizing women. Be advocates for women. This includes men. There is no better way to break down the patriarchy than to be part of it and publicly and outwardly contest it. When the audience demands women get equal representation, the media will start to listen. And when the media starts to take notice, women will finally be deemed important and newsworthy.

Reflection

I am truly grateful for this opportunity to research and reflect on a topic that is so important to me. While it took me some time to nail down a theme and direction, the process of unpacking various issues that are important to me eventually led me to this piece. Many emotions arose from my research. I'm angry that politics and stereotypes continue to denigrate women's participation in society and subsequently in sport. I am shocked at the heartless and lackluster nature of women's sports coverage. I am upset that women are not valued and are judged so harshly. I've been an athlete practically since the day I could walk. Having an identical twin who identifies the same way meant that we were constantly pushing each other beyond our limits to pursue a certain level of excellence. To not be seen, or heard, or valued, calls into question the very essence of my being and that work I put in so consistently and passionately. The many hurdles that I faced throughout my athletic career parallel those of the female athletes that were mentioned throughout this piece. If the media landscape doesn't change, then unfortunately hundreds and thousands of other female athletes will be left feeling the same way.

Digital media is giving a glimmer of hope to the female athlete. I am excited to see that women's stories are being told and in a way that is meaningful and resonates with people. Thanks to this class and my research, I understand more fully the importance of the media and its role in determining who and what really matters. As a collective, we must strive for equality. More and more agencies are recognizing the value in sharing the female story and experience. I am excited to see how digital media continues to advance the voice of women in sport and how that affects society at large. There is also a very important role that brands will play in this effort moving forward and I am excited to be a part of that process in my career after school.

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