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Media Representation

In Women's Sports

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The basketball game was in progress, 3rd quarter, with 6 minutes remaining in the period. The Wyoming Warriors trailed the Texas Tornadoes by a scant 3 points in the championship game. Commentators Jack King and Bill Johnson announced the play-by-play: "The Warriors' Center Jennifer Haskell has been struggling today, Bill. She seems to have lost her strong rebounding ability. She's got the height, but it's not helping her today, I'm afraid." Bill responds: "Looks that way, Jack. Those long legs may still be a bit weak after her recent appendectomy. From her performance today, looks like she's still not quite back to normal. Let's take a look at an interview Jennifer gave recently after she was cleared to return to the team." [The camera cuts away for a 2 ½ minute interview and 4 minutes of commercials.] "Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen. We're now in 4th quarter play, with the Warriors edging the Tornadoes by 2." [The cameras continue to follow game play from overhead, panning the length of the court.] "We hope you'll stay with us, folks, for the championship game coming up in just about 30 minutes, immediately following this women's final. For now, we'd like to provide you with a few statistics on who's predicted to win, as well as a few recent happenings with the expected star of the game, Terence Mills. He's been tearing up the boards lately, with an average 42 points per game!" [Camera cues picture and statistical graphics of Terence Mills.]

This commentary, although fictitious, may seem innocuous enough at first glance, but a closer look should cause concern from men and women alike. Short, sketchy game segments, poor production methods, gender-biased descriptors, and preoccupation with another (male) championship game are all evidence of inequity in women's sports coverage. The last fifty years have seemingly brought more equality to women in a number of ways, but for now that equality seems to fall far short of the sports arena. This article showcases several bodies of work

intended to dissect the media's representation of various women's sports. Specifically, it will look at the quantity and quality of women's sports coverage, as well as implications for the future of female athletes and athletics. Finally, suggestions for further study will be made.

Quantity of Media Coverage for Women's Sports

In the United States, not a day goes by that one cannot turn on a television and see any number of televised sporting events. Since the advent of the medium itself, these events have been dominated by the male gender. In the early years of television, this male dominance was not surprising, since many things were just beginning to change for women at that time; i.e., the mid- to post-World War II era found women leaving their homes to take public jobs and pursue other interests outside the home. However, male dominance has continued throughout sports media history and even now shows great disparity between the genders.

This is true despite the fact that a 1993 survey conducted by the Associated Press (AP) and the Sports Marketing Group Inc. reported that women (or women paired with men) held four of the top seven spots in sports popularity in the United States. Women's figure skating and gymnastics were two and three, respectively, following only NFL football. Pairs figure skating and ice dancing, featuring both women and men, held two of the remaining seven spots. Furthermore, the survey went on to reveal that numbers of female fans are on the increase, as well as numbers of male fans interested in women's sports (Bridge 1994).

This huge gender disparity is evident in print media, as well. A study of four large, regional U.S. newspapers revealed in 1990 that photos of male athletes outpaced photos of females by a ratio of 13 to 1, and male sports stories overshadowed female stories by 23 to 1 (Bridge 1994). A separate study, conducted by Salwen and Wood (1994), revealed that Sports

Illustrated magazine, prominent in sports journalism, depicted identifiable women athletes on its cover only 4.4% of the time between 1957 and 1989.

If the 1993 AP survey is accurate, then how can one account for this type of disparity? Are the broadcasters and readers themselves at fault? Is it a matter of fan loyalty, enthusiasm, commitment, and/or gender? Do fan demographics translate into commercial issues to the exclusion of equity? Do other societal gender biases and stereotypes bleed into the sports world? The results of numerous empirical studies seem to suggest that all of these play a role.

One of the earliest examples of this may be the All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) that was instituted by P. K. Wrigley and Branch Rickey in 1942. During its years of existence (1942-1954), the league enjoyed great popularity. In fact, it was the first – and only – successful women's professional baseball league. While no one would deny that its inception during the war contributed to its success, the fact that it continued for nine additional years cannot be explained away so easily (Weiller & Higgs, 1997).

During these same years, there were also various other sports (including men's baseball) being played, most with male athletes. Still, the AAGPBL drew anywhere from 2500 to 20,000 fans to each of its games. The study suggests that several factors, unique to the era, contributed to this success. Apparently, the league fulfilled a need for community spirit. People often felt a commitment to their local, hometown team. Sometimes they even knew the players and invited them over to dinner. Often, attending games was an activity that the whole family could engage in for relatively little money; hence, socialization played a role. Gas rationing during the war prevented extensive travel, and the ballparks were scattered throughout 13 Midwestern U.S. cities, easily reached by the masses. Parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, and spouses all joined in the action (Weiller & Higgs, 1997).

When asked why they were fans of the league, study participants indicated that at first they viewed the AAGPBL as a substitute for men's baseball during the war, but they soon came to appreciate the level of professional play, the entertainment value, and the competition between the teams. Many attributed the end of the league to such factors as the popularity of television, repopulation of men's teams after the war, and lack of financial backing and a good farm team system (Weiller & Higgs, 1997).

The first of these factors, the popularity of television, warrants further discussion. As more and more households became owners of their own set, diversity of programming expanded. Sports played no small role in that programming. Today sports consume large segments of time – and even have entire channels dedicated to nothing else. Still, women are grossly underrepresented.

This has been evidenced in two separate analyses conducted of Olympic Games coverage from 1992 to 1998. The 1992 and 1996 summer games were held in Barcelona, Spain, and Atlanta, Georgia, respectively; Lillehammer, Norway, and Nagano, Japan, hosted the 1994 and 1998 winter games. The Olympics are a good indicator of media representation, since there are many examples of both male and female events for the same sports activities.

Higgs and Weiller (1994) studied 60 hours of taped segments from the 1992 games, while Eastman and Billings (1999) analyzed 150 total hours of prime-time videotaped segments of the 1994, 1996, and 1998 games. Data from both studies clearly indicate that the networks were attempting to bring the ratio of male to female coverage to a reasonable level of equity, but that the majority of coverage still belonged to the men, with 56% or more of available air time (Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Eastman and Billings, 1999). These percentages rose and fell dramatically, based upon which sports were being featured – and the notoriety of the athletes

playing them, whether male or female. For example, 1992's U.S. Dream Team (comprised of professional NBA players) undoubtedly skewed coverage of men's basketball.

Oddly, the 1996 games in Atlanta were heavily promoted as "the Olympics of the women," yet media coverage for female athletes and events actually showed a drastic drop in coverage from the 1994 games. This did rebound somewhat in 1998, but did not reach 1994 percentages (Eastman & Billings, 1999).

Finally, in a study of two national sports news shows, C.A. Tuggle (1997) suggests that female sports coverage does not increase when female commentators are added to the equation. In a one-month study in 1995, Tuggle studied ESPN's SportsCenter and CNN's Sports Tonight broadcasts in an effort to evaluate coverage of female sports. Each show had a regular female anchor (compared to 4 males), yet only a combined 4.9% of stories were about female athletes – despite the fact that the study was deliberately centered around the U.S. Open Tennis Championships taking place at the time.

Quality of Media Coverage for Women's Sports

Compounding the problem of under-representation in media coverage is the obvious bias toward male sports as the "standard" by which all sports are compared. Martina Navratilova, 56-time winner of Grand Slam tennis tournaments, asserts that the media exercises a strong double standard in its practices. Women are expected to be morally sound, physically graceful and non-combative, willing to accept lesser pay for the same sports, and humble about their abilities (Navratilova, 1996).

In her study of audience frustration and pleasure, Toni Bruce (1998) cited a full 19 sources whose findings all drew the same conclusions: "Across time, country, sport, and media

form, the findings have been remarkably consistent: Women athletes are ignored, trivialized, stereotyped, devalued, or, at best, treated with ambivalence” (p. 1).

Simple economics undoubtedly play a huge role in these decisions – and coverage of all sports. Even male sports are not fully covered; consider the fate of volleyball, cycling, sailing, bowling, etc. (Bridge, 1994). However, it is also obvious that male sports events get the lion's share of production money. Differences may be subtle, such as using reporters, analyst commentary, and taped comments from participants and observers for male events, while assigning studio anchors to read stories of female events (Tuggle, 1997). Or, they may be more obvious, such as broadcasting women's basketball in the middle of the night (if at all), using fewer cameras and shooting angles on the court, joining games in progress, referring to female players' physical features, and comparing female players to male players (Bruce, 1998).

Further, Jones and Jackson (1999) discovered that the same types of inequities exist in print. They analyzed 67 articles describing the gold-medal wins of the U.S. Women's Olympic Teams in basketball, gymnastics, hockey, soccer, and softball. Articles were taken from national and regional newspapers, as well as Sports Illustrated magazine. The purpose of their research was to study the language and descriptors used to describe the female athletes, based on whether or not they were playing gender-appropriate (ex. gymnastics), gender-neutral (ex. softball), or gender-inappropriate (ex. hockey) sports. (Gender appropriateness was determined by using categories from a 1986 study by Matteo. In general, this defined male-appropriate sports as those emphasizing physical contact, aggression, and autonomous behavior. Female-appropriate sports emphasized aesthetics, beauty, and non-physicality.)

As expected, the Jones and Jackson (1999) study supported three hypotheses: (1) that passages describing the performance of female athletes conveyed stereotypic beliefs about

gender; as an example, “Her beauty and grace on the balance beam are beyond compare”; (2) that there were task-irrelevant statements (unrelated to performance), male stereotypes, and comparisons to male athletes when women were playing male-appropriate sports (ex. hockey); and (3) that more task-relevant statements and female stereotypes were used when females were playing female-appropriate or neutral sports (ex. gymnastics or softball).

In fact, these findings reinforce the broadcast analysis done by Higgs and Weiller (1994) on the 1992 Summer Olympic Games. While coverage of events was roughly 56% to 44% in favor of male sports, percentages swung radically with regard to type of sport. For instance, men had 74% of total basketball coverage and 75% of total volleyball coverage. These two sports are considered male, team, “power” sports. Women were given major air time for individual, non-contact events, such as gymnastics (84% of total sport coverage), cycling (60%), tennis (67%), and rowing (67%).

Interestingly, when gymnastics were aired, male athletes were portrayed with straightforward camera shots; they were referred to as “men;” and they were almost always described in terms of power and athleticism (with 60 strength descriptors and 8 weakness descriptors). When female athletes were portrayed, they were often referred to as “girls,” even though their ages were comparable to the “men;” they were portrayed with evocative camera shots, light-enhancing filters, and enhancing music; and they were described in terms of beauty, grace, and emotion (with 30 strength descriptors and 110 weakness descriptors) (Higgs & Weiller, 1994).

Fan Demographics

It would be unjust to suggest that the media has deliberately sabotaged women's sports without regard to the wishes of the viewing/reading public. Sports media exists to turn a profit,

just like any other business. So, who is the viewing and reading public? What is their level of interest in sports? Why do they watch or read about sports?

A survey of 707 adults in Los Angeles and Indianapolis suggests that both men and women are consumers of sports (Ganz & Wenner, 1991). However, their reasons for watching may be entirely different. Men appear to watch sports events for such reasons as entertainment, excitement, socialization with other males, relaxation, etc. On the other hand, women tend to watch because other family and friends are watching, and it is an opportunity to spend time with them. They are less boisterous than the men, and they tend to do other activities at the same time.

Men also tend to engage in more pre- and post-game sports activities, such as watching sports newscasts, engaging in conversations about the events, and drinking more alcoholic beverages. Women tend to have less discretionary time, however, and seldom expend the same amount of emotional energy for sports (Ganz & Wenner, 1991).

Still, there are women fans that delight in spectating. This may be the result of actively playing in a particular sport, having close friends and family who have participated in particular sports, living in atypical households where negotiation of viewing time is not an issue, etc. (Bruce, 1998).

At least one television network is banking on women's involvement. Toronto, Canada, will launch a new women's sports channel in September of this year. WTSN is a spin-off of TSN (The Sports Network), where 33% of its 76 million household viewing audience is comprised of women. The station will feature original sports programming, as well as sports news, weekly series about female athletes and athletics, and some shared programming with TSN (Ingrassia, 2001).

Implications for the Future of Female Athletes and Athletics

While the sports media appear to have a double standard that heavily favors male athletics, the industry will continue to do what makes sense in terms of business reality and economic fortitude. Many questions remain regarding the future of female athletes and athletic events.

Some have suggested that the hire of more female sportscasters and sportswriters will help level the field. Evidence exists that it will not (Tuggle, 1997). At least one television station is basing its existence on dedicated female viewers, as well as male viewers interested in female sporting events (Ingrassia, 2001). Society at-large has already proven that segregation does not work. Will sports media re-write the rules where sports are concerned? In fact, will this type of segregation add to the competition that already divides many households (Ganz & Wenner, 1991)? As long as society continues to view events, issues, and platforms as either inherently male or female, will this not simply reinforce division between the genders?

Discussion

The question of gender equality in sports is as complex as it is in society at-large. Women's long-standing quest to measure up to the male "standard" continues. Further study is suggested to answer several questions: Does gender segregation work with regard to broadcast media? Will female sports stations be supported by both males and females? How are athletes who participate in gender-inappropriate sports viewed? Are audiences willing to support opposite-gender sporting events?

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