

CAN YOU HEAR ME?

Reframing Media
To Elevate
Women's Sports



*the current media environment and the
improvements necessary for women in sport*

Photo by: Harrison Boyce

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Introduction



Photo by: Ruby Wallau

Sports are “one of the most powerful, economic, social, and political institutions on the planet” and seen by the United Nations as a unifier and equalizer, a way to bring communities and nations together. Sports can act as an agent of social change and have the power to “break down gender barriers and provide role models for empowering women and girls,” said former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (Subden, 2021). Girls and women who participate in sports-based programs have been found to stay in school longer, delay

marriage, report improved mental well-being, feel more confident, have expanded social networks, and are more likely to challenge gender norms in public spaces. Sports promote positive body image and self-esteem as well as challenge norms around how women and girls should look*. However, the Women’s Sports Foundation found that by age fourteen, girls are six times more likely to stop playing sports than their male counterparts*. Why? Because the sports industry places women as outsiders.

Photo By: Antonio Bronic



title IX

The enactment of Title IX in 1972 ignited a wave of enthusiasm and introduced unprecedented opportunities for women in sports in the United States, breaking centuries of exclusion*.

Title IX is a federal legislation that prohibits discrimination based on sex in educational institutions that receive federal money. This legislation applies to career education, employment, sexual harassment, education of pregnant or parenting students, and most notably, athletics. Title IX has three main categories it covers: accommodation of interests and abilities, athletic financial assistance and other program areas*.

categories

- 1 Accommodation of interests and abilities requires female students be provided with equitable participation opportunities.
- 2 Athletic financial assistance requires athletic departments to offer proportional athletic scholarship dollars to the gender enrollment at the institution.
- 3 Other program areas requires equal treatment of male and female students in regard to scheduling, travel, equipment and supplies, access to tutoring, publicity and promotions, locker rooms, competitive facilities, medical and training facilities and services, recruitment, housing and dining facilities, and support services*.

the problem

Although Title IX has grown female participation in sports almost equal to males, coverage of women's sports is seriously lacking in comparison*. A three-decade-long study by Professor of American Studies and Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Cheryl Cooky found little change in quantitative apportionment in coverage of women's and men's sports from 1989 to 2019*. What's more, women are also dramatically underrepresented as sports media professionals*. As women are rarely seen in association with sports, young girls often lack role models in the sports industry. Does this lead them to feel discouraged from participating in sports or consider becoming a sports media professional?

*all references can be found in sources listed on page 21
all sources from 2016 to 2024 on U.S. women's sports
ALL PHOTOS USED FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES



Photo By: Jeff Cohen

progress has been made...

This is not to take away from the immense progress that is currently taking place in the sports media environment. In recent years, there have been several cases where women's sporting events were watched by huge crowds and dispersed media audiences*. The 2024 NCAA women's March Madness championship game was the first time in history the women's NCAA March Madness Final was watched more than the men's final. The 2020 WNBA draft drew a 123% increase in viewership from the previous year, and the previous viewership record of 601,000 in 2004 was shattered this year in 2024 at a peak of 3.09 million viewers, a 414% increase*.



Photo by: Sankalp Tripathi

In August of 2023, Women's College Volleyball shattered an all-time attendance record of 92,003 fans and, in November of the same year, The National Women's Soccer League signed the largest media deal in women's sports history. Female athletes are now more represented on Team USA at the Olympics than male athletes and are winning more medals as well*.

Photo By: Matt Pendleton



Wasserman’s The Collective, a sports marketing talent management company, in partnership with ESPN Research, estimated women’s sports coverage could reach up to 20% of the sports media environment by 2025. The Collective’s publication is the most recent study on women’s sports coverage, released in October of 2023, and it states women currently hold 15% of total sports media coverage*. Incredible progress has been made, and it is exciting to see strides made for women in sports, but I do not believe 15%, even 20%, is near enough, and the coverage of women in the sports industry remains disappointing. As controllers of discretionary spending in households, mothers who influence the sports their children play, and workers, the sports industry needs women*. However, female athletes have been and continue to be treated poorly in the media and pushed to the outside as sports media professionals.

Women's sports
make up
15% of
the total
sports media
landscape.

orts



a





Photo By: Pablo Jimenez

Hegemonic Masculinity

Sports culture has created a system where men are seen as dominant and expected to be in charge while women are expected to follow resulting in power structures, promotion of traditional gender roles and gender inequalities*. In sports culture, there is a strong emphasis on stereotypically masculine traits*. Sports culture values toughness, being aggressive, competitiveness, physical strength, looking muscular, large body size and even violence*. This can make it harder for people, especially women, who don't fit those stereotypes to participate. This theory of placing

“...women are outsiders who must ‘fit in’ a naturally masculine and patriarchal arena.”

-Pamela Laucella

masculinity and its associated traits as the ideal in society is referred to as hegemonic masculinity*. This system is maintained not just by force, but also by influencing our beliefs and ideas through vehicles such as the media*. So, even though it's not always

obvious, these ideas about masculinity control how we think and behave in sports and society ultimately reinforcing a patriarchal system*. The

reproduction of privilege is extremely evident in sports as men and/or white individuals are by far the most visible groups in sports media*.



maintenance

Hegemonic masculinity is maintained through various strategies, some subtle, some more obvious. Within sports coverage, men's "Big Three" sports- football, basketball, and baseball- receive coverage in and out of season, while women struggle to gain any media attention. Constant coverage of these sports builds and sustains audience interest, knowledge, and emotional connection to the athletes, teams, or sport*. Poorly produced content, the use of demeaning language, and poor portrayals of female athletes in textual and visual sports media establish males as superior while delegitimizing female athletes*. Moreover, greater prize money and schedule priority for men signals the inferiority of women as well as the lack of female role models in sports media reaffirms the norm that sport is a male domain*.

media production

On top of sports coverage, sports media production also remains male-dominated as women make up a small fraction of sports reporters, commentators, presenters, experts and so on. If women are hired as sports media professionals, they are often not taken seriously, trolled, harassed, or only in charge of covering women's sports*. Hegemonic masculinity is sustained in sports production through a concept referred to as homologous reproduction. The idea of homologous reproduction within the sports industry means the individuals in charge, mostly white men, continue to hire individuals who are similar to or resemble them therefore limiting the opportunity for diverse individuals and viewpoints to enter the industry*. Also, funding decisions within sports newsrooms and ingrained assumptions on audience interests prioritize men's sports further strengthening the perception that male sports have higher value and worth*.

overall

Sports media often reinforces patriarchal ideologies and excludes or poorly portrays female athletes and media professionals, perpetuating male dominance. This continuous preservation of males as superior within sports can be referred to as hegemonic masculinity. The well-documented movement of girls and women into sports has challenged the ingrained assumptions of male athletic superiority. These assumptions become evident in daily societal interactions and in the policies and practices that govern sports*. Many improvements are still necessary.

Photo by: Andy Lyons



Framing Theory

The mass media provides society with information. Framing is the way in which the mass media places or portrays topics, events, or issues ultimately shaping how the public sees the world*. Framing influences reasoning, the way we say something often matters much more than what we say*. What is emphasized, what's left unsaid, and so on shape how people think, feel and act about an idea playing a major role in social change*. Framing is a gradual process that occurs over time most commonly and impactful on topics or issues an individual is uncertain of therefore their opinion is formed from how something is communicated to them by the media*. Framing also affects how we judge the importance of a topic, based on the media's depiction of and volume of coverage on the event or issue*.

If female athletes are poorly portrayed or ignored in the media, then consumers frame their opinions based on this portrayal or lack thereof. Frames are powerful communication schemas in which meanings are assigned to events, identity, and other culturally significant topics are formed. They matter when generating and sustaining audience interest and creating public opinion*. If a topic is framed in an uninteresting manner and small changes in the presentation are made, large changes of opinion can be the result*. Overall, in sports media, female athletes and media professionals are framed as unimportant, inferior to their male counterparts and so on through the quantity of coverage they receive as well as how they are portrayed in media*.



Photo by: Steph Chambers



Photo By: Jerome Miron

mechanisms

Mechanisms used that contribute to the poor media constructions of female athletes and women's sports include funding decisions that result in poor quality and production of content therefore shifting the audiences' perception of the value and worth of women's sports*. Moreover, female athletes are frequently discussed in terms of their lack of skill, their athletic competence is minimized, their heterosexuality and femininity are highlighted or emphasized, and overall, female athletes are "othered" or marginalized*. In sports media, female athletes are most shown in aesthetically pleasing, sex-appropriate, or individual sports and often placed out of the context of their sport, in passive poses, or with a concentration on them as a mother, wife, girlfriend, etc*. The media tends to focus on female athletes' physical attractiveness and appearance over their athleticism and competence which male athletes are praised for. Women are sometimes referred to as girls in sports media whereas men will never be referred to as boys*. Also, men are frequently elevated for their charitable contributions while women's activism and contributions almost never make the frame*.

Some of these frames might seem small and insignificant, sometimes you might not even notice them, yet the large majority of media coverage on women's sports utilizes at least one of these frames. The constant poor portrayal of female athletes in the media for decades has positioned women's sports as less important and less valuable than men's.

Female athletes are tokenized, marginalized, sexualized, racialized, objectified, infantilized, and so on when they receive media coverage*. On the other hand, men's "Big Three" sports- football, basketball and baseball- receive exciting, high-quality content in and out of season*. This year-round representation continues to grow a fan base for these sports. What's more, when women's stories are covered, it is typically a single story surrounded by men's stories which are longer, with more direct quotes*.



Photo by: Ashton Daniel Robertson



Photo By: Charlotte Little

the frames

A three-decade-long study done by Cheryl Cooky found in the years 1989, 1993, and 1999 sports media coverage had a common theme of insulting female athletes as objects of derision, trivialization, infantilization, and humorous sexualization. A few years later in 2004 and 2009, there was a decline in humorous sexualization and overly insulting stories but rather a shift to placing female athletes as mothers, wives, and girlfriends of men. Finally, in 2014 insulting trivialization and sexualization of female athletes was now rare and the wife-girlfriend-mother portrayal continued to subside. 2014 began a time with "...what appeared to be an effort to present women's sports stories respectfully..." (Cooky, 2021).

impact

Images are powerful symbols that carry cultural meaning and are more readily accepted as representing fact*. The media depicting women's sports and female athletes in harmful frames continues to place women as inferior to men and reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. Of over 100 nationally surveyed sports editors, one-quarter to one-third view women as less athletic, less interested in sports, and assume women's sports are less valuable*. If media production professionals are viewing women in these ways, imagine the bias in their production.

Put simply, media depiction often furthers already existing stereotypes within the sports industry. This reproduces this belief to their audience through subconscious or perhaps conscious framing choices of women's sports content. With male dominance in sports production leaving a low number of positions available to women, they have not been able to influence the quantity, quality or framing of women's sports coverage*. The "shrink it and pink it" and "sex sells" techniques were proven ineffective and to be damaging society's perceptions of female athletes years ago, so why are we still not recognizing or giving credit to female athletes and their athletic abilities?*





The representations of female athletes in the past few years, decades after the passing of Title IX, have done little to advance the cultural acceptance of women in sports*. Again, this is not to say we have not made progress; America has made great strides for women in sports while an extreme unevenness of resources and opportunities for women in different parts of the world is still very much prevalent. Also, women experience intersectional disadvantages with women in poorer, racialized and religiously oppressive contexts at the bottom and much of the advancement that has occurred among relatively affluent, culturally advantaged communities*.

Overall, the media plays a big role in shaping people's beliefs and attitudes. Coverage and events showcasing women's sports have the potential to evolve stereotypes and people's embedded ideologies. If the media can reinforce stereotypes, it can challenge them too. Media exposure is associated with greater communion and agency for women. While negative portrayals of a group can increase prejudice against them, greater exposure to counter-stereotypes can improve attitudes and shift people's perceptions*. We need to be aware of the frames we place female athletes in and shift away from sexualizing, demeaning, and ignoring them. Language and storytelling play a huge role in shaping audience perceptions of women in sports*.

Gender-Bland Sexism

As opposed to the overt sexism that was common in the early coverage of women's sports up until the mid-2000s, sexism in sports media today occurs in more covert ways*. Gender-bland sexism is the idea that sports commentators and anchors frame women in a lackluster and uninspired manner*. With minimal knowledge of women's sports, the individuals in the sports production industry present games, events and accomplishments of female athletes in a matter-of-fact style lacking enthusiasm*.



Photo by: Sandro Halank



Photo by: Nola Gallagher



impact

In an attempt to be inclusive, these professionals stray away from blatant and obvious sexist commentary, but in doing so might continue to perpetuate beliefs of men's athletic superiority through their presentation of women's sports*. Female athletes' accomplishments are downplayed, compliments are restrained or less generous than their male counterparts, and big wins or milestones are expressed with little excitement*. Discussing women's sports in bland or boring ways reinforces the gender hierarchy*.

Various studies have proven the fast-paced, funny, action-packed language present in men's sports content is absent from women's content*. On top of less verbal pop, excitement, and

being discussed in a dull, monotone, matter-of-fact style, the coverage of women's sports is also presented in less visually exciting ways*. Men's sports coverage has more camera angles, shot types, special effects, and overall longer length of segments*.

overall

High-quality coverage builds audience knowledge, interest, and excitement. The minimalistic and boring presentation of women's sports in media stunts interest.* Inherent male superiority is subtler and more difficult to detect than before in the media, but is still present, nonetheless.

**“...inconsistent coverage,
mysteries and misconceptions
make it hard for women's
sports to build a passionate
loyal following.”
-Shira Springer**

Media Environment



Photo By: Tony Rotundo

Now that the quantity and quality of women's sports content is understood, let's look at the bigger picture. 2023 was a transformative year for female athletes being seen and shattering records. So, what sparked this shift and how do we capitalize on this recent growth in interest? In 2022, the NCAA women's March Madness tournament rebranded and with it came an increased awareness, fanbase, and demand for streaming. The next year the average viewership of the women's March Madness tournament broke records for a women's tournament*. That brings us to 2024 where finally the NCAA women's championship game

was watched more than the men's. The audience interest is undeniable, and all it took was a little reframing and rebranding. Women's sports digital publications social media mentions peak during high-profile sporting events such as the Women's World Cup, March Madness and the Olympics*. Some of the most accepted or fought-for women's sports are a part of these events- soccer, basketball, gymnastics, etc*. We need to advance other, less accepted, lesser-known women's sports. In order to do so, we need to understand the media environment.



Photo By: Maddie Meyer

An interesting statistic from Kantar states, "...50% of fans would go out of their way to support brands that sponsor women's sports—which trends higher for Gen Z at 63%..." (Boland, 2023). In other words, the exceptionally growing fan base of women's sports fans is very likely to invest in brands that also support women's sports. "71% of Women's World Cup fans believe that companies who sponsor the tournament show their commitment to the advancement of gender equality and women's sports" (Hensley, 2023). What's more, a brand investing in women's sports has been found to have a stronger growth rate than investing in men's sports. Women's sports are bringing in new fans at double the rate of men's sports. The retention rate of women's sports fans is also nearly twice that of men's

sports fans*. If supporting women's sports can be such a catalyst for success in a brand, brands need to start investing. But how?

Gen Z is watching women's sports more than any other age group and mostly engaging with this content through social media and streaming services*. In the United States, women make up more than half of women's sports fans, 78% of women have social media in comparison to 66% of men, and the most active age group on social media are between the ages of 19 and 29*. Also, women are more interested in social media content of female athletes or teams participating in trends and behind-the-scenes content*. Women and Gen Z make up a large majority of women's sports fans and both groups favor social media content.

Recommendations

for businesses

- 1** Businesses should **develop marketing strategies specific to women's sports. Invest in female fan development strategies and female fandom research** to spark massive growth in a business. Utilize social media and streaming services. Also, recognize women attending women's sports have passionate feelings towards supporting women, capitalize on it. Most importantly, **create content centered around women's sports**, but make sure to include positive portrayals of social groups and produce counter-stereotypical images of female athletes to reduce stereotypes.
- 2** **Collaborate with or show your support for women's sports publications and websites** that give a platform to female athletes and sports media professionals.
- 3** **Start new businesses revolving around women's sports** such as launching a female-focused or feminist sports podcast, a women's sports-centered website, a sports media startup, and so on. Draw attention to women's sports.
- 4** **Advocate** for female athletes and push for better coverage. Introducing new voices to the scene and trying out different approaches to cover women's sports can advance its progression in the sports media landscape. **Demonstrate how women's sports are entertaining, money-making.**



Photo By: Nate Billings



Photo By: James Chance

for consumers

1 Recognize the frames female athletes are being placed in, challenge blatantly sexist, ignorantly biased culture in sports media and demand better coverage. As a consumer, you have the power. Your consumption and engagement drives a business' decisions. As you consume and engage with women's sports, they will need to expand their business to reach their audience. Demanding more from a company forces them to shift their approach to meet your expectations.

2 Purchase subscriptions to streaming services, news organizations and media outlets as well as buy from businesses that advance the acceptance of women's sports and empower female athletes. Doing so will create a movement in the marketplace to progress the desire to see gender equality and representation in sports, thus encouraging broader support and investment in women's athletics.



Photo By: Leez Snow



Photo By: Darryl Dyck

for the media

Internal

1 Within media production companies, **storytelling needs to be prioritized**. It takes knowledge to tell great stories, and this is where a lot of media outlets struggle when covering women's sports. **Knowledgeable coverage** requires more time and dedication to find, follow and cover for women's sports, but knowledge from the media spreads knowledge to the audience. Moreover, focusing on lesser-known stories, and backstories of female athletes, women's teams or leagues can help advance audience interest and begin to foster a positive portrayal of women's sports*. As examined by the framing theory, the media's portrayal of female athletes and women's sports shape people's opinions. If the media shifts their representation of female athletes and tell their stories, the audience will engage in counter-stereotypical images and information. This can slowly revise the audience's perception of women's sports.

2 Pay attention and **make events with diverse athletes visible**. Similar to the importance of storytelling, **avoiding stereotypical representations** encourages social inclusion and participation in sports while simultaneously discouraging discrimination.

3 The **hiring of more female media professionals**, specifically more female writers, can begin to challenge the hegemonic masculinity present in sports culture. The audience is currently not receiving enough information or knowledge on the athletes they are watching, but if they are made aware of this, they may become inclined to search for information on their own without the help of live media coverage. Also, women's different viewpoints can reframe sports content changing the conversation around sport in unexpected ways. In sum, more effort needs to be invested in **finding, hiring, and developing talented women into the sports media industry**.

4 On top of hiring more women in the sports media profession, we need to **encourage male allies to raise their voices***. Male allies can further progress the representation and acceptance of women in the sports media industry as well as encourage others to do the same.

5 Altogether, a change in sports department culture is necessary. Currently, the culture within the media industry's sports departments value men's stories, viewing women's sports coverage as a stepping stone to bigger, better opportunities such as the men's "Big Three". Placing women's sports as "entry-level stories" further promotes this hierarchy in sports media*. **Women's sports content should be recognized as more than just how to start one's career**.

External

- 1 We live in a top-down media world, meaning change is spurred by major outlets with broad reach*. Media outlets need to **commit to shifting the way they present and the amount of time they dedicate to women's sports** for real change to begin to occur.
- 2 **Consistent coverage** is one of the main areas keeping men's sports at the forefront of the sports industry. Women's sports need coverage **in and out of season, year-round** like their male counterparts to make the audience hungry for more.
- 3 Similarly, media outlets need to **prominently feature women's sports** in sports media segments. Placing female athletes within a **comparable duration of segments** as male athletes and more frequently recognizing women's sports will continue to advance them within society.
- 4 Social media is one of the top avenues that should be used to **broaden awareness** of women's sports. Media outlets should **utilize social media** to raise awareness and boost the interest of female athletes and women's sports teams and leagues.
- 5 By now, it should be obvious the sports industry lacks diversity of individuals, resulting in a lack of variety in perspectives and opinions. If media outlets begin to **publicly call out organizations on their lack of diversity**, we can inch our way towards a more inclusive and equal sports media environment.
- 6 Lastly, **advocacy** for women's athletics from media outlets will continue to progress these individuals within sports culture while also **acknowledging the discrimination and inequalities women have endured and continue to face**.



Photo By:Delly Carr

About Me

My name is Bailey Smith and I am originally from the San Francisco Bay Area. I was lucky enough to grow up in a large and extremely active family. Our entire family gets together every Thanksgiving morning and play an intense game of kids versus adults soccer. We used to play football, but too many injuries were occurring. During the COVID-19 pandemic, my mom, dad, sisters, dogs and I would go on multi-mile walks and in late 2021 we hiked Half Dome in Yosemite National Park as a family.

I started playing sports when I was five years old, as soon as I was old enough. Shortly after, I began playing softball, my mom's favorite sport which she continued to coach at my high school up until this last year in 2023. I tried every position before I realized softball was not fast-paced enough for me. I found out about the sport of lacrosse from one of my friends and soccer teammates in sixth grade. Our local club team hosted tryouts a few weeks later and I began my lacrosse journey. I quickly fell in love with the sport and decided to join a high-level summer league. I continued to play competitive Division 1 club and high school soccer as well as summer league and high school lacrosse through high school. The end of my freshmen year of high school when recruitment for college sports was on the horizon, I realized lacrosse was my true passion.



I continued to play soccer but placed my focus on lacrosse and committed to the University of Oregon. I played for five years while earning my Bachelors and Masters degrees.

Growing up surrounded by soccer, I idolized the U.S. Women's National Team. My soccer teams would have watch parties and sometimes even use the games to advance our knowledge of the sport, watching the players in our position and taking notes. I loved watching the success of the women. Seeing them inspired me to do the same, for years my dream was to play soccer on the U.S. Women's National Team.





Being from the West Coast, lacrosse was new to my area when I was younger and it continues to grow in popularity everyday. Lacrosse began on the East Coast and its popularity and a majority of the best players in the world stem from there. Even after starting my lacrosse journey and learning more about the culture of lacrosse, it remains very unknown and underrepresented in sports media. Being a female athlete at an established sports-centered University, I began to realize more and more the inequalities faced by female athletes in many areas, but mostly in the media. Also, as an advertising major and sports business minor, I became more aware of sports media and advertisements alike. I love analyzing the strategies and creative behind all mediums of advertisements, but with it came with an attention to detail on individuals like me, female athletes.

In this magazine, I aim to raise this same awareness for consumers and media outlets. My Masters in Advertising and Brand Responsibility has taught me about the power of brands making statements as well as the power consumers hold.

The future is bright as trailblazers and pioneers continue to advance the vision of women's sports in the media. I hope the progress being made remains on an upward trend, brands recognize the value in investing in women's sports, and media outlets cover all women's sports in the same exciting, consistent, and empowering ways men's sports are.



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Dedicated to my family, friends, past coaches
and teammates; those who supported
my sports journey.

Bailey Smith