

THIRD EDITION

COMMUNICATION AND **SPORT**

SURVEYING THE FIELD

ANDREW C. BILLINGS
MICHAEL L. BUTTERWORTH
PAUL D. TURMAN



6

GENDER IN SPORT

Sport is buried in gender stereotypes, with disparaging phrases such as throwing a ball "like a girl" or the need for a team to "man up" still percolating within modern conversation. The gender barriers present within sport started as obstacles of opportunity (not allowing women to play and, if so, mocking them for participation) yet now are barriers of lack of respect, resources, coverage, and equity. Progress has been made, yet many barriers remain. For instance, the rise of women's participation in sport has caused the creation of more women-only leagues and less coeducational sports opportunities for gendered unity. In a similar law of unintended consequences, the rise of women's sports media offerings has come at a time of increased sports media channels as a whole, making women's sports (and really all American men's sports that are not football, baseball, or basketball) less likely to be on mainstream sports channels (such as ESPN) and more likely to be on harder-to-find sports channels (such as NBC Sports Network). Discussions of women in sport are different than those about gender issues in sport; the former is about the struggle for participation, opportunity, and equal treatment for one identity group, while the latter is about the power-laden *interaction* between this identity group and those who currently have the access and opportunities: men. Sometimes, notions of sex roles and gender identity become intermingled, with sex roles being based on biological differences between men and women and gender roles being largely socially constructed. Thus, sex becomes more binary (either an XX or XY chromosome makeup ends the discussion), whereas notions of gender become far more malleable (indeed, notions of gender change depending on aspects of background, culture, and life experience being exerted upon the binary chromosomal makeup). Put simply, we explore gender issues (since communication is structured through words and other social interactions) through what sport often creates as sex divisions (associations that

allow either only men or women to play exclusively). This chapter explores both feminist and interactive gender issues by (a) surveying the history of women's sport, (b) discussing gender roles under the broader theoretical construct of hegemonic masculinity, (c) assessing the amount of current coverage and exposure afforded to men's and women's sport, (d) addressing gendered language differences in sports media, (e) outlining current opportunities and struggles for women in modern sporting society, and (f) offering gender in sport as a possible agent for social change within an increasingly global society.

A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S SPORTS PARTICIPATION

The history of women's participation in sport is not as long as the history of their desire for inclusion. In fact, records show that even in the 1700s, women were arguing in print that they should be included in athletics (Sandoz & Winans, 1999).

Hargreaves (1994) delineates three distinct time frames for women in sport. She claims the first ranges from the inception of modern sports in 1896 until 1928—an era of overwhelming exclusion and dismissal of any combination of women and sport.

The second spans from 1928 to 1952—a period when primarily “feminine-appropriate” sports received relatively meager forms of societal attention. Hardin and Greer (2009) articulate the sports that are considered feminine (such as gymnastics and swimming) and also those that society more often regards as not appropriate for women (such as basketball and boxing). Opportunities happened in the sports in which ladies could still behave as they were expected to for the time period. For instance, golf became a mainstream women's sport during Hargreaves's second time span. Hauser (1999) claims that “golf was said to be the ‘gentlemen's game,’ but it was also the perfect sport for a gentle woman” (p. 81). Women's professional golf (and the Ladies Professional Golf Association, or LPGA) was founded during this time period, as players such as Babe Didrikson Zaharias were respected for their abilities. Sports such as tennis became mainstream for women; Wimbledon hosted its first women's tournament in 1884, just 7 years after the gentlemen's championships began, yet the women's championships became much less a perceived sideshow during this time period. Other sporting opportunities arose as men went to fight in World War II. The rise and fall of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League is chronicled with a fair dose of historical accuracy in the 1992 film *A League of Their Own*. Opportunities for women in a wider range of sports were still quite limited, however. Of all the athletes participating in the 1948 London Olympics, just 90 women competed (as opposed to nearly 5,000 today). Hargreaves argues that



Carli Lloyd (center, in white) at the 2015 Women's World Cup

Source: By Nicki Dugan Pogue on Flickr <https://www.flickr.com/photos/49503073847@N01/19781383336/>. [CC BY-SA 2.0]. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>

because of increased recognition for women's sporting accomplishments, the standards of skill and international competition accelerated substantially.

The third era provided by Hargreaves ranges from 1952 to the present day, representing decades in which women's sports have been able to conquer traditional power structures while challenging long-held stereotypes about women's athleticism. While this third era is certainly progressive in relation to the previous two, women often find their access to facilities, trainers, coaches, and media exposure still lacking when compared to their male counterparts. Nonetheless, the 1970s brought two tipping points that aided a surge in women's athletics that still escalates today.

Tipping Point #1: Title IX

The most significant change for women's sports in the United States occurred in the early 1970s, when Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 made gender equity into law, stating, "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." Title IX is now largely regarded as an athletic law, but note that sport was not specifically mentioned in the wording of Title IX. Rather, athletics was previously considered the largest violator of this principle, making gender equity in sports the most immediately observable change in American gender policies.

Compliance with Title IX has long been a hotly debated issue (see Suggs, 2006), with the three-prong approach of 1979 still being used today (see Hardin, Whiteside, & Ash,

INTERVIEW

DR. CHERYL COOKY, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,
PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Q: Female participation in sport is at an all-time high; roughly equal numbers of females and males report an interest in playing at a high school level. Yet, your research shows that media coverage of female athletes does not reflect this change. Why is media coverage not following this growth in female athletic participation?

A: Researchers have speculated as to why such unevenness exists. Some of the coverage of women's sports has migrated to niche media outlets such as *espnW.com* and blogs such as those featured on Women Talk Sports. While this is good for fans of women's sports, it lets the "mainstream" sports outlets like ESPN's *SportsCenter* off the hook from engaging in sustained coverage of women's sports. Since most viewers will learn about sports through mainstream outlets, this prevents the growth of women's sports beyond the "hard core" women sports fan. Others have suggested that sports media is male-dominated, and unless more women are involved in the production-side of sports journalism, we will continue to see the trends in the lack of media coverage of women's sports. The assumption here is that women journalists and broadcasters will want and be empowered to cover women's sports. While it is a worthwhile endeavor to increase the numbers of women in sports journalism (Richard Lapchick's annual report on gender, race, and sports editors attests to this need), in our research we have called for the hiring of sports broadcasters and camera crews that are willing and able to invest in covering women's sports regardless of their gender

and who are willing and able to cover women's sports in a way that mirrors the coverage of men's sports (e.g., high production values, exciting and colorful commentary). Of course, some journalists and sports broadcasters will argue that the trends in coverage exist because the media are simply giving viewers what they want (i.e., supply and demand). Our research demonstrates that the media creates demand and builds audiences for men's sports while ignoring women's.

Q: Society has moved toward gender fluidity (Facebook has 50 different gender designations). Yet sport is still defined in the binary: male/female. Is this problematic?

A: Yes. Instead of recognizing sports performance as a continuum rather than a binary, as Mary Jo Kane argued in the mid-1990s, where some women outperform some men, sex segregation (the mechanism by which the binary is enacted) in sports is both legally enforced (via Title IX) and culturally accepted. Moreover, the sex/gender binary as it is reproduced in sports contexts is hierarchical such that notions of male physical superiority and female physical inferiority are reproduced. An illustrative example of this is in the sex testing/gender verification/regulations on female hyperandrogenism that falsely constructs a sex/gender binary, in spite of the realities of sex as a continuum. Many athletes come under "suspicion" in part because of their gender appearance. Athletes who subscribe to Western standards of beauty and femininity are less likely to have their sex/gender called into question and thus are less likely

(Continued)

INTERVIEW (Continued)

to be subject to sex testing/gender verification. Of course, governing bodies like the International Olympic Committee and the National Collegiate Athletics Association have policies that allow for the participation of trans-athletes, yet these policies require invasive medical surgeries and procedures (and not all trans individuals wish to fully transition from one sex to the other or are able to afford these expensive surgeries).

Q: To what extent is sport still an entity of exclusion for females?

A: Over the past 40-plus years in the United States—and elsewhere—we have seen impressive growth in opportunities for girls and women to participate in sports. We have also seen a shift toward cultural acceptance and even celebration of female athleticism. Despite these gains, girls and women continue to experience exclusion. Women are also underrepresented in leadership positions on sports teams (as coaches) and in sports organizations (as managers, owners, etc.) and in sports media (as writers, commentators, broadcasters, editors). Lack of media coverage, sex testing in sports, the everyday exclusionary cultures of sports bars and sports stadiums wherein women fans continue to

be sexualized, objectified, and are victims of sexual harassment and assault are other examples of the exclusion.

Q: Opportunities for women in sport-related fields are still far more limited than for men. What can be done to allow more women into the industry?

A: We have to change the cultural association of sports with masculinity. If sports continue to be "a man's world," women will continue to struggle to not only get hired in the industry but to thrive. Women who assimilate to the masculinist cultures of sports organizations may experience less resistance to their presence within those organizations and may even be embraced, promoted, and celebrated. For women who do not assimilate or who wish to challenge the masculinist cultures of sports, they are either marginalized or excluded. However, it should be noted that the underrepresentation of women occurs in other facets of our society and so addressing the lack of women in the sports industry cannot happen outside of the societal forces that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in other industries and sectors, such as the lack of women directors and producers in Hollywood, the lack of women in C-suite positions in corporations, and so on.

2014). More specifically, college and high school athletic programs are considered to be in compliance if any one of the following three prongs is satisfied:

1. Athletic opportunities are provided that are proportionate to the student enrollment.
2. Athletic opportunities are continually expanded for the underrepresented sex.
3. Athletic interests of the underrepresented sex are fully satisfied.

Most college athletic programs strive for compliance under the first prong but use the other two prongs as a means for demonstrating they are continually striving to provide more opportunities for women's athletics. In 2010, the use of student surveys to register compliance based on student interest was eliminated (Thomas, 2010).

Compliance is becoming increasingly difficult as the percentages of men and women enrolled in college have changed dramatically. At Title IX's inception, men and women attended colleges and universities in roughly equal numbers; by 2005, for every 100 male students, there were 135 female students (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016). These demographic shifts cause athletic departments to do one of two things to achieve proportionality compliance: They must either add more women's sports or end existing men's sports. The fact that Division I football programs are permitted 85 scholarships exacerbates the problems confronting lower profile men's sports. Men's sports such as wrestling and gymnastics have experienced diminished resources and, in many cases, elimination from athletic programs to balance the scales, causing even greater criticism of the ramification of Title IX within these sporting communities. Moreover, the University of Oregon dropped its wrestling program shortly after investing over \$3 million for a new football locker room, illustrating how such decisions are not only the result of Title IX but also seemingly the result of an ever-expanding budget argued to be necessary to compete at the highest level.

Regardless of where one stands on proper implementation of Title IX, the impact on women's athletics has been eye popping. Consider the participation rates for five sports 25 years after Title IX was established (see Table 6.1).

TABLE 6.1 ■ Women's High School Sports Participation Rates (1972, 2007)

Sport	1972 Participants	2007 Participants	% Change
Soccer	700	337,632	+ 48,133%
Lacrosse	450	54,771	+ 12,071%
Cross Country	1,719	183,376	+ 10,568%
Golf	1,118	66,283	+ 5,829%
Bowling	370	20,931	+ 5,557%

Source: Angel, A., Bella, T., Brady, S., & Brauner, D. (2009, March 23). Lady killers. *ESPN: The Magazine*, p. 34.

Tipping Point #2: The Battle of the Sexes

Nothing can match the impact of Title IX, but another landmark event of the 1970s still can be regarded as a tipping point for women's opportunities in sport: the 1973 tennis exhibition between former men's number 1 player Bobby Riggs and women's superstar Billie Jean King. The 55-year-old Riggs claimed he could still beat the best women's tennis had to offer; he had already defeated Margaret Court, 6-2, 6-1, which only further motivated King to rise to this challenge. Most knew beforehand that this match would be part of the history of women's rights in society regardless of the outcome. However, when King won in straight sets, the event took on even greater meaning. While gender equality was resisted in false urban legends that Riggs got only one serve while King got two and that Riggs bet large sums of money against himself to fix the match, the outcome galvanized women athletes seeking a place within the sporting landscape

Memorabilia from
Billie Jean King's
match against Bobby
Riggs



Source: daking [CC-BY 2.0]

and also, for millions of people, signaled that more equal treatment of women at home and at the workplace would surely follow. Given that the event was nationally televised with great promotional fanfare, the impact of the event was that women's athletics was much more widely considered to at least deserve a place at the sporting table. Whereas Title IX was government-mandated inclusion of women in athletics, the Battle of the Sexes was a direct challenge to men's near-exclusive hold on sport.

Moments of Recent Decades

Women's athletics had many highs and lows in the subsequent years, yet the overarching mindset shifted from one of fighting for a space to play to one where women athletes are perceived as commonplace, embodied in the feeling noted by Meân and Kassing (2008, p. 126): "I would just like to be known as an athlete." Still, overarching structures appear constantly in flux. The Women's Professional Basketball League lasted a mere three seasons, folding in 1981. The LPGA continues to struggle for sponsors and media exposure. The first generation of women to benefit from Title IX clearly forged new ground; NBC's Bob Costas refers to the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics as the Title IX Games because so many of the American women who took center stage were born close to the advent of the legislation. Progress can be measured in many ways, such as the high rating garnered for the 2015 Women's World Cup soccer final, the fact that all Grand Slam tennis tournaments now pay men's and women's champions equal sums of money, and Annika Sorenstam's valiant effort to make the cut in an all-male Professional Golf Association (PGA) event, missing by four shots at the 2003 Colonial tournament. Still, some moments have been bizarre (the highest rating ever for women-oriented sport

CASE STUDY**U.S. SOCCER'S GLASS CEILING**

Few would argue that the USA Women's Soccer Team has had significantly more success on the international stage compared to their male counterparts. The women's team has been one of the most successful competitors in international soccer, having won three Women's World Cup titles and four Olympic Gold Medals. Since the Women's World Cup was implemented in 1991, each of the U.S. Women's teams have medaled and held onto the #1 ranking from early 2008 until 2014. In comparison, the U.S. Men's team has medaled in World Cup competition only once [dating back to 1930] and, until recently, has struggled even to qualify for international competition.

However, despite these accomplishments, the formula for funding the U.S. men's and women's team has a clear imbalance. For example, when the U.S. Men's team earns a win against a significant opponent each player receives a bonus of \$17,625, compared to only \$1,350 for members of the women's team. To make the issue even more egregious, members of the men's team earn a \$5,000 stipend for each loss compared to no such benefit afforded to the women's team following a loss or tie. In an attempt to address this issue, the U.S. Women's National Soccer team filed a complaint in early 2016 with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission claiming wage discrimination for being paid nearly four times less than their clearly less successful male counterparts. Such a structure may be conceivable in an environment where the male equivalent serves as the primary revenue generator for the sport. However, that is not the case for U.S. Soccer. The women's team consistently achieves higher ticket sales as well as television ratings than the men's team, resulting in a formula that is outdated considering the revenue generated by the women's team on an annual basis.

1. U.S. Women's soccer is certainly unique in its ability to generate considerably higher revenues than their male counterparts, but what factors do you feel drive the national organization's formula for distributing revenue to players?
2. Outside a decision not to compete on the U.S. Women's team, what other options might the players have for working to address this perceived inequity?
3. How are the historical issues associated with women's athletics discussed earlier in this chapter influential in producing this type of outcome for the U.S. Women's team?

remains the 1994 Olympic skating of Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding, at least partly inflated by the earlier physical assault on Kerrigan by people close to Harding), while other advancements seem to have been begrudgingly accepted, such as when Augusta National Golf Club admitted two women members in 2012—former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and South Carolina businesswoman Darla Moore—but only after years of protests. The history of women in sports has been one of steady progress, with setbacks outnumbered by advances as women continually seek out new ways to join the community of sport. Nevertheless, women continue to break boundaries in

sport, establishing noteworthy firsts, such as Ronda Rousey's becoming the first woman Ultimate Fighting Championship (mixed martial arts) Bantamweight Champion in 2012, Mo'Ne Davis pitching a shutout in the 2014 Little League World Series, and Becky Hammon (San Antonio Spurs) and Kathryn Smith (Buffalo Bills) becoming the first full-time women assistant coaches in their professional sports leagues in 2014 and 2016, respectively.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN SPORT

Foundational theorists, such as Gramsci (1971), have used the concept of hegemony to explain how power becomes entrenched in established beliefs regarding power and myth. As Connell (1987) says, "In Western countries . . . images of ideal masculinity are constructed and promoted most systematically through competitive sport" (pp. 84–85). Given that hegemony is not only about power but also about winning, it is not surprising that scholars have used hegemonic masculinity to explain how male athletes maintain dominance in sport that ranges from access to economics to participation rates to media coverage. More specifically, Trujillo (1991) claimed that hegemonic masculinity "refers to the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that, operating on the terrain of 'common sense' and conventional morality, defines 'what it means to be a man'" (p. 291). Using pitcher Nolan Ryan as exemplar, Trujillo articulated five features: (1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) patriarchy, (4) romantic frontiersman or modern outdoorsman, and (5) heterosexuality; these features jointly



Swimmer prepares
for backstroke

Source: © iStockphoto.com/Microgen

reinforce masculine ideals at the expense of other forms of masculinity, homosexual men, and women.

Sport often is defined as who is bigger, faster, and stronger, and yes, males have proven in world records that they are objectively bigger, faster, and stronger because of biological circumstance. Nonetheless, one cannot discount the endless cycle of certain sports (boxing, basketball) that are considered masculine that then results in media coverage that is predominantly masculine, which then embeds discourses to society that reinforce notions that sports are not for all but for males (see Hardin & Greer, 2009). Applying hegemonic masculinity also can explain how male athletes sometimes are typified in more objective manners (again, the bigger, faster, stronger) than the more nuanced and repeatable athletic skills (finesse, touch, control; see Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013). For instance, mediated basketball coverage on programs such as ESPN's *SportsCenter* is more likely to show powerful men performing slam dunks than talented men executing a spot-on assist for a timely layup. Nevertheless, the increased popularity of women athletes in power-oriented sports (such as Ronda Rousey and Holly Holm in UFC) could indicate an increased public willingness to seek out women in a wider array of sports.

THEORETICALLY SPEAKING

FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

Standpoint theory dates back at least to early 19th century theories developed by German philosophers, including Georg Hegel and Karl Marx. These theorists were interested in different perspectives about the world between members of the dominant social class and those who were on the margins. Variations of standpoint theory, including Nancy Hartsock's (1983) feminist standpoint theory, have subsequently theorized the experience of different oppressed groups. Hartsock's theory is grounded in the assumption that contemporary society is characterized by a fundamental power imbalance that gives men far greater cultural, economic, and political capital than women (what feminists commonly refer to as "patriarchy"). She contends, therefore, that in order to achieve a more humane balance, feminist standpoint theory enables scholars to reveal unequal divisions

of labor and cultural representations that marginalize and oppress women. One prominent theme in feminist studies of sport is the concern that women athletes are too often defined as "women" (with the assumption that they should be "attractive" and "feminine") first and "athletes" second. Shugart's (2003) study of the 1999 U.S. Women's World Cup team illustrates precisely this concern. Because so much of the media's attention was on the physical appearance of the team members, their historic World Cup victory was at risk of becoming an afterthought. Similar concerns have been expressed about athletes such as Danica Patrick, Maria Sharapova, and Hope Solo. Feminist standpoint theory, therefore, facilitates more open discussions about communication practices that, intentionally or not, subordinate women to men and men's interests.

GENDERED COVERAGE OF SPORT

Regarding media exposure, the amount of women's sports coverage on local news and on flagship programming such as ESPN's *SportsCenter* is at an all-time low. Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015) found that a 2014 sample of *SportsCenter* had just 2.0% of all coverage devoted to women's sports. Even elements such as scrolling sports "tickers" doubled that total to only 5% to 6%, leading to the conclusion that such tickers become "a kind of visual and textual ghetto" for women's sports (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015, p. 8). Billings and Young (2015) found that this was not merely an ESPN problem, as FOX Sports Live (on FOX Sports 1) showed women at an even lower proportion. Table 6.2 indicates the breakdown between the two networks over two different 1-month periods:

The authors found that it wasn't merely the amount of coverage, but that the number of stories were smaller for women athletes and, moreover, were much less comprehensive, as highlighted in Table 6.3.

TABLE 6.2 ■ Clock-Time by Program (in Seconds)

	Men	Women	Mixed	TOTAL
ESPN	144,989 (97.5%)	1,445 (1.0%)	2,308 (1.5%)	148,742
FOX1	168,885 (97.4%)	970 (0.6%)	3,498 (2.0%)	173,353
TOTAL	313,874 (97.4%)	2,415 (0.8%)	5,806 (1.8%)	322,095

Source: Billings, A. C., & Young, B. D. (2015). Comparing flagship news programs: Women's sport coverage in ESPN's *SportsCenter* and FOX Sports 1's *FOX Sports Live*. *Electronic News*, 9(1), 3-16.

TABLE 6.3 ■ Average Length of Story by Program (in Minutes: Seconds)

	Men	Women	Mixed	TOTAL
ESPN	1:28:95	1:02:83	1:32:32	1:28:64
FOX1	1:17:72	53:89	1:32:05	1:17:77
TOTAL	1:22:53	58:90	1:32:16	1:22:44

Source: Billings, A. C., & Young, B. D. (2015). Comparing flagship news programs: Women's sport coverage in ESPN's *SportsCenter* and FOX Sports 1's *FOX Sports Live*. *Electronic News*, 9(1), 3-16.

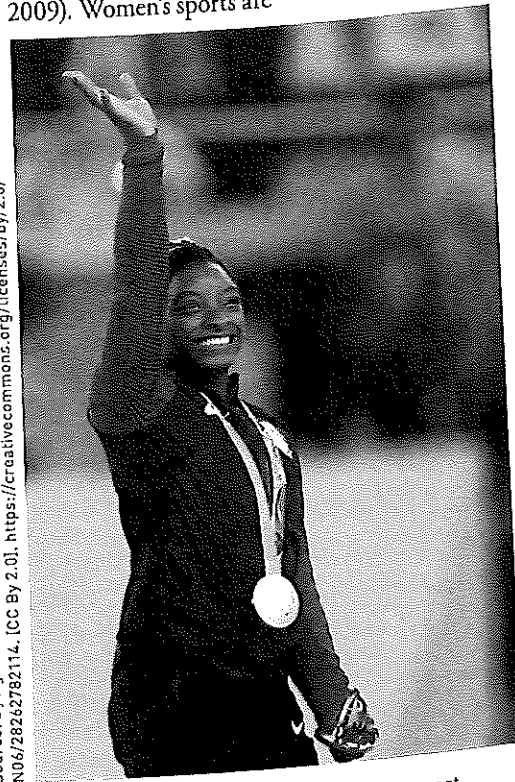
Such findings echo concerns previously found within ESPN's flagship program, where the National Spelling Bee received more coverage than an entire week's nightly coverage of women's sports (Eastman & Billings, 2000). Such lack of focus on women's athletics is found in print media as well; Weber and Carini (2013) found that women athletes

received more exposure from *Sports Illustrated* covers in the years 1954 to 1965 than in the years 2000 to 2011, where just 4.9% of all covers featured a woman athlete. Such trends were found in the United Kingdom press as well, leading Godoy-Pressland (2014, p. 595) to conclude that the embodied attitude was that there was “nothing to report” in regard to women’s sports. As Kane (2013) explained, “The better sportswomen get, the more the media ignore them” (p. 231).

While existing power structures tell a major part of the story, the relative lack of women viewers and readers of sports products is a mitigating factor. Women argue they do not consume as much sports media product as men do because so little of it focuses on women’s athletics, yet others counter that women fans do not support their athletes and teams in substantial doses in instances when they are shown. The 2012 folding of Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS) is a case in which the majority of the admittedly small viewership was men, a trend found in many other televised women’s sports, including women’s professional tennis and basketball. Scholars have found that women consume sports differently than men because of issues such as leisure time choices and familial commitments, making them consume less sports media than their male counterparts (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). In fact, the only two major sporting events that draw more women than men viewers are the Olympics and the Kentucky Derby (Helm, 2009). Women’s sports are frequently offered on fringe or secondary cable networks, making the events difficult to find, yet more men than women are seeking out these sports media offerings.

Given that women represent the majority of U.S. Olympic viewers, one must wonder whether the coverage highlights women in equal measures or if it is conversely diminished, following the trends previously outlined in *SportsCenter*, local television news, and *Sports Illustrated*. A composite of the findings from Billings (2008); Billings, Angelini, and Duke (2010); and Angelini, MacArthur, and Billings (2012) were reported on the gendered clock-time differences in six Olympic telecasts (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2).

A rudimentary glance at the data shows several key trends. First, the Summer Olympics telecast has consistently shown more women athletes than men. One explanation for this trend derives from the fact that there are fewer events in the Winter Games, meaning more preliminary rounds are aired and making the fact that there are more male athletes competing at the Games more meaningful. Another is that the Summer Games features athletes in attire that is considered appealing for the at-home male viewer, with many highlighted events showing women athletes in swimsuits and leotards. Another key trend worthy of note is that for the first time in Olympic media analyses, women received more media coverage than men (in the 2012 London Games). Although the fact that



U.S. Gymnast
Simone Biles

Source: By Agência Brasil Fotografias on Flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/129726681@N06/28262782114/>. [CC BY 2.0]. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

American women won more medals than the American men may have facilitated this result, and one analysis does not necessarily represent an overarching trend, one conclusion that can be fairly drawn is that the increased focus on women Olympians did not hinder ratings, as NBC's telecast averaged 31.1 nightly viewers (International Olympic Committee, 2012), often quadrupling the rating of any other show on any network during the time period. The Olympics demonstrates that media outlets can draw a very high viewership while featuring women athletes, something underscored long ago in the largely surprising 13.3 rating of the 1999 Women's World Cup final between the United States and China and then surpassed with a 15.2 rating for the United States

FIGURE 6.1 ■ Proportion of Men's and Women's Olympic Coverage in the 1996–2008 Summer Olympics

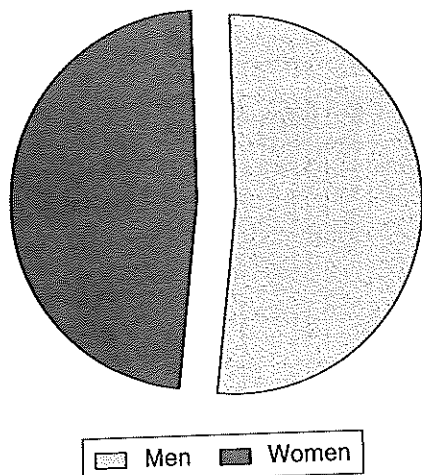
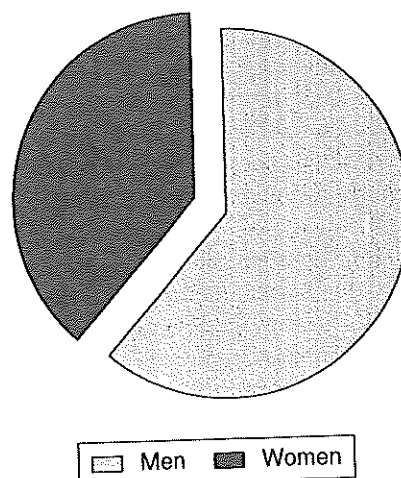


FIGURE 6.2 ■ Proportion of Men's and Women's Olympic Coverage in the 1998–2010 Winter Olympics



Sources: Billings, 2008; Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2012.

versus Japan Women's World Cup final 16 years later, a rating higher than for the NBA Finals earlier in the same summer.

GENDERED LANGUAGE IN SPORT

Males and females may do similar things and even play the same sports, but the notion that they do so in overwhelmingly different ways is still quite prevalent in modern society. As explained in Messner (2002), beliefs that "men are from Mars, and women are from Venus" are "depressing evidence of how a renewed essentialism—the belief that

women and men are so naturally and categorically different that they might as well be from different planets" (p. 1) remains. When former Wimbledon Gentlemen's Singles champion Pat Cash said that women's tennis is to men's tennis what horse manure is to thoroughbred racing (Spice Girls of Centre Court, 1999), he received more laughs than admonishment, a sign that women can play sports but are not exempt from being mocked by this decision. In terms of language, the result for women in sport is the diminishment or mitigation of their participation and accomplishments.

Naming Practices

One action that serves to diminish women's sports involves naming practices (see Halbert & Latimer, 1994). To wit, team sports employ qualifiers to women's teams to differentiate them from the "standard" men's teams. For example, a high school may have two basketball teams: the boy's team, called the Lakers, and the girl's team, called the Lady Lakers. The use of the feminine qualifier (especially in the absence of a men's equivalent) is a form of naming practice. In a similar vein, women athletes are more likely to be referenced by their first names, while men are most often referred to by their last names. Thus, we know that "Annika" was a great women's golfer, but "Watson" was a great men's golfer. In tennis, rivalries persisted, matching "Serena" and "Maria" (rather than Williams versus Sharapova), while men's rivalries pitted Sampras versus Agassi. It is fair to counter that these practices are occasionally used because women's last names can change when they get married, yet most modern athletes retain their last names, making this impact negligible. Other than the anomaly that occurs when the Williams sisters play tennis (making first names critical for clarification), naming practices impart no gender division that would innately occur, and yet they do. The impact on women who play sport below the professional level can be felt, as women often believe that naming practices relegate them to second-class status.

Gender Marking

The feeling that women's sport is substandard to men's is often felt in gender marking, a practice of qualifying which gender is participating in a given sport. Such marking becomes problematic when it is employed for women far more frequently than for men. For instance, one often sees media outlets that refer to two sports: basketball and women's basketball. When the qualifier is not used, the presumed gender is almost always male. Some associations reinforce these markings largely because the men's association was founded first, making the women's organization adopt a new gendered tag. Thus, we have the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) because the Professional Golf Association (PGA) had already been established for the men; similarly, we have the National Basketball Association (NBA) and then the gender-marked Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). These qualifiers are then used to ascribe limiting assessments of women's achievement, such as referencing a person as the "best *women's* player in the conference" or "playing well enough to enjoy success on the *women's* tour." One could argue that the qualifier is necessary because men tend to be bigger, faster, and stronger than women at the highest levels of virtually all sports. Still, the notion that we appreciate only the fastest does not appear to apply in car racing, for instance,

when the people regarded as the best drivers are ones driving for National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), not Indy Car, which offers substantially more powerful cars. The inverse also doesn't seem to apply in athletics when agility makes women perhaps more innately capable, such as with certain flexibility requirements in gymnastics. Instead, such size and flexibility is sometimes couched as an unfair advantage, such as when Kacy Catanzaro became the first woman to qualify for the *American Ninja Warrior* finals, yet received criticism that her small size and flexibility diminished this accomplishment.

A MATTER OF ETHICS

STRIKING A POSE

As mixed martial arts (MMA) continues to gain in popularity, women have slowly become more visible in the sport—none more so than Ronda Rousey, largely considered one of the elite female competitors in MMA. You may also know about Rousey because she meets the standards of conventional beauty in American culture. In part to raise both her own profile and the profile of her sport, Rousey has featured that beauty in provocative magazine photo shoots and covers, including *ESPN The Magazine's* 2012 Body Issue and the September 2013 issue of *Maxim*.

In this chapter, you've seen that many female athletes still face either overt discrimination or more subtle forms of sexism, including the expectation that they should remain "feminine" or "pretty" while competing in sports. Increasingly, however, athletes such as Anna Kournikova, Natalie Gulbis, and Danica Patrick choose to emphasize their physical appearance as a means to increase their marketability. The outcome of these choices is undeniable: Attractive female athletes who pose for

publications such as *Maxim* or *Playboy* (predominantly read by heterosexual men) generally raise their profiles and collect more and more lucrative endorsements.

Critics of these athletes counter that while these overtly sexual images may benefit individual women, they do harm to countless other women who are not able to conform to conventional standards of beauty. In addition, their decision to pose nude (or nearly nude) for an overwhelmingly male audience risks reducing women to simple objects of sexual pleasure, which minimizes the actual *achievements* of women athletes.

Do women who pose for these publications have a responsibility to other women? Should an appearance in *Maxim* be understood primarily as a business decision? Why is it still important for female athletes to demonstrate their "femininity"? Are men held to the same expectations as women when they choose to exploit their own appearance and sexuality?

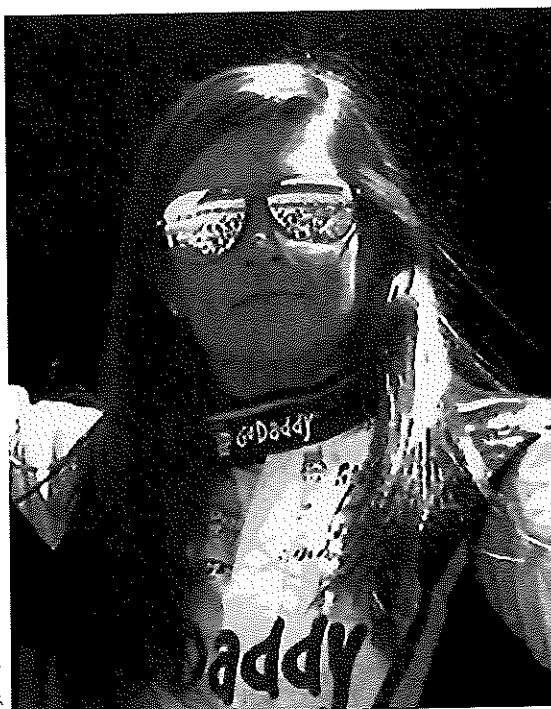
Sexual Disparagement

Gendered language also is used to presumably stigmatize a people through the mislabeling and denunciation of sexual orientations. Female athletes continually battle being labeled as “butch” or lesbian (Anderson, 2005) when excelling at sports, while homosexual slurs are heaped on males when they fail to perform adequately in sports. Griffin (2007) delineates six ways in which homophobia is manifest in sport: (1) silence—such as the lack of overwhelming outrage when Penn State women’s basketball coach Rene Portland enacted a no-lesbian policy (see Hardin, 2009); (2) denial—either claiming not to be gay or claiming that one’s private life is not for public discussion; (3) apology—a performance of proper gender roles, particularly in public roles other than during sport; (4) promotion of heterosexuality image—the LPGA using attractive photo shoots and calendars for promotion (see Hundley & Billings, 2010); (5) attacks on lesbians—bad-mouthing in recruiting, arguing that other teams have a disproportionate number of gay players; and (6) preferences for male coaches—hiding homosexuality in women’s sports through the presence of a male coach. Chapter 8 reveals much more about how athletes feel pressures to perform in certain ways that match not only their own identity characteristics but also the identity characteristics that they presume are most desirable in society.

Categorical Differences in Gendered Media Dialogue

Decades of study (see Billings, 2009; Blinde, Greendorfer, & Sankner, 1991; Daddario, 1998) have led to a longitudinal understanding of how men and women athletes are depicted, using divergent dialogues within the media. One should note that stereotyping is still a notion that is studied within communication scholarship, but the understanding of difference and bias has largely trumped the search for stereotypical behavior. This is largely because both social scientists and critical/cultural scholars have uncovered dialogic differences in sports commentary that may not fit traditional gendered power structures or overt sexism yet nonetheless represent difference in the manner in which we understand men and women athletes. Given that there are biological (e.g., pregnancy or the presence of testosterone) and sociological differences (e.g., unequal opportunities for men and women to compete in youth sports) between the genders that impact athletic performance, some difference is to be expected. Still, one must temper these anticipated

Source: By Sarah Stierch, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TSM350_-_2015_-_Danica_Patrick_-_3_-_Stierch.jpg. [CC BY 4.0]. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>



NASCAR driver
Danica Patrick

differences with notions of dominance and power that also inevitably percolate within these media dialogues. Consider commentary within the 2009 U.S. Open Tennis Tournament, wherein Kim Clijsters was asked over and over again, "How does it feel to win . . . *as a mom?*?"

The following are some terms more likely to be attributed to a male athlete:

Powerful

Conquering

Best in the world

Fearless

Incredible

The following are some terms more likely to be attributed to a female athlete:

Talented

Dedicated

Best woman in the world

Emotional

Nice

OFF THE BEATEN PATH GYMNASTICS

While the female gymnast's career could be over by the age of 20, the typical age of male Olympic gymnasts ranges between 19 and 26. This is largely due to the discrepancies between the nature of the events in which male and female gymnasts participate. The apparatuses differ between men's and women's gymnastics. Both sexes compete on the vault and floor exercises; the other men's events include the pommel horse, still rings, parallel bars, and high bar, and the women's events include the balance beam and uneven bars. Men's gymnastic events require a great deal of upper-body

strength and muscular endurance, which men gain as their bodies develop into their mid-20s. Women's gymnastics focus more on grace and flexibility, which are easier to develop at a young age and more difficult to maintain postpubescence. Male and female gymnasts are ultimately judged differently based on physical attributes, which is reflected not only on scorecards but in the eyes of spectators as well. Female gymnasts garner more media attention and are often more celebrated by fans than their male counterparts.

Thus, there are some forms of comments that are more often attributed to men than women athletes. For instance, the most basic trend that has been consistently detected involves the notion that men are inherently superior in terms of athletic skill. This belief has been broken down into subcategories including superior power ("like a runaway locomotive"), touch ("incredible precision in his turns"), and finesse ("one of a handful of people in the world who could perform that dunk").

Beyond this hardwired trend, male athletes are also more likely to be considered superiorly experienced at their sport of choice. Some of these types of comments may be founded in logic and the sociological differences discussed earlier. For example, sports such as gymnastics typically involve teenaged female gymnasts but men in their 20s. Also, men athletes may truly have more experience (as measured in years rather than amount of practice time) because boys are encouraged to play more organized sports at earlier ages. Even when taking these mitigating factors into account, however, there is still a disproportionate focus on the experience of men athletes when compared to women of similar expertise and backgrounds.

A final trend that is likely to favor men involves perception of superior composure. Media analyses have found that commentary can sometimes regard men athletes as more "ready for the moment." Winners of men's sports events are more likely than winners of women's sports events to have their success attributed to mental toughness and the ability to be unrelenting when faced with an emotional moment.

There are also several areas in which women athletes are more likely to receive comments than men. Perhaps the most unsurprising trend involves a tendency for sports media outlets to concentrate on the overall attractiveness of women athletes. When one considers that the overwhelming majority of sportscasters are male and presumably heterosexual, this may not be much of a shock. However, the types of comments can nonetheless diminish the accomplishments of women athletes (and a discussion of the overt sexualization of women athletes can be found in Chapter 9). Consider the ramifications of watching a telecast where a female gymnast is referred to as an "adorable pixie" or perhaps the official FIFA's language in 2015, describing Alex Morgan as "a talented goal scorer with a style that is very easy on the eye and good looks to match." Some studies have found that in terms of sheer counts of comments about men's and women's bodies, the numbers could be considered to be relatively equivalent. However, the comments surrounding men athletes tend to be more apt to fall into references to physique ("built like Superman") than the same comments about attractiveness that women players more often receive.

Beyond an increased focus on looks, women receive more comments than men do about being emotional. Some members of society still argue that women are "too emotional" and "take things personally" in all circumstances, which is then used to argue that women cannot perform effectively at the highest level of the workplace. These same misguided notions have been found to seep into sports media commentary. This is perhaps a corollary to the trend to perceive men's superior composure—men athletes are depicted as succeeding because they do not let emotions override their athletic desires, and women athletes are perceived as failing for succumbing to these same obstacles.

A final type of commentary that women athletes are more likely to receive than men athletes involves attributions of luck. When a woman succeeds in sport, commentators may attempt to temper these achievements by noting that the player had some breaks go her way. This is often unpacked in communication scholarship as "consonance" or the notion that everything simply comes together at a moment in time to impact the athletic moment. Thus, positive consonance can exact victory (a basketball player who "couldn't miss tonight" or was "on fire") just as negative consonance can result in defeat ("just wasn't his night"). In terms of gender, women are more likely to receive comments about positive consonance than are men. This is especially true when women compete against men in the same competition. For instance, urban legends persist surrounding the Billie Jean King/Bobby Riggs Battle of the Sexes, arguing that King must have won because of luck. When the result couldn't be directly attributable to luck, false claims were made that Riggs received only one serve per point and that King was allowed to hit into the doubles court (both are absolutely untrue). In a similar vein, when Annika Sorenstam competed in a sanctioned PGA tournament, a commentator witnessed a man's shot bouncing from the rough onto the green and noted that it was an "Annika bounce," potentially implying that Sorenstam had a better-than-anticipated score earlier that day because of superior luck.

In all, it is abundantly clear that men and women athletes are described in a variety of media outlets in substantially different manners. Some differences are justified, some are explainable, and others could be judged to arise from personal ignorance. Regardless, the astute communication scholar must understand the dialogic differences involved in the conversations that surround sport at all levels of society.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEN AND WOMEN IN SPORT

Mark Twain once observed that "rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated," and this appears to be the case when talking about the old-boy network of sports. One cannot talk about opportunities in sport—whether involving jobs or mere access—without talking about power. Social class certainly is a contributing factor, yet gender is critical to the discussion, as men have possessed entrenched power roles throughout the inception and evolution of modern sport (see Oates, 2012). Female sports team owners are still regarded more as anomalies than as trends toward equality. Debates once circled over whether any Division I men's basketball program would offer a head coaching position to prominent former Tennessee women's coaching legend Pat Summitt, who amassed 1,098 victories and eight national championships. Women's access to sportscasting jobs is almost universally relegated to that of sideline reporter or weather prognosticator, with the sports industry still harboring less than progressive gender stances (see Genovese, 2015). These cases are hardly indications that sports structures are providing more access for women, yet instances such as the aforementioned hiring of women into key men's team coaching positions provide some glimpses of progress for women.

In terms of sheer numbers of jobs, the opportunities for women in sport are growing but at a very slow rate. The Women's Sports Foundation (2009) admits that sport is still highly male dominated but argues that five trends are leading to more opportunities for women within the sports marketplace:

1. *The active female consumer.* Women now out-purchase men for items such as athletic shoes and clothing.
2. *Females as spectators of men's and women's sports.* While we have already established that women rarely outnumber men when watching sportscasts, they do represent 40% of all sports consumers—and that proportion is increasing.
3. *Males and females as spectators of women's sports.* Women's professional leagues are struggling financially, yet their mere existence represents progress when compared to past opportunities.
4. *Women's sports being accepted by the sports media.* One should not equate the lower amount of media coverage to women's sports as being less acceptance of athletic talents; the fact that Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban even publicly commented about former Baylor standout Brittney Griner playing in the NBA should be considered a positive harbinger.
5. *Corporations using sports to sell to women.* "Athletic" looks are desired within a significant segment of the women consumer population, often more than "sexy" looks. Organizations are hiring women athletes as spokespersons and sponsoring women's sporting events because of this trend.

Some of these postulates could be assessed as mere spin, trying to create a self-fulfilling prophecy, yet all of these trends are, indeed, pointing in the direction of more opportunities for women, even if the scale of these chances is not remotely equivalent to that of men.

Nonetheless, even when given the right to earn a job in sports media, women face many additional hurdles. Hardin and Shain (2005) report that half of women in sports journalism report being verbally abused in conjunction with their jobs. This ranged from sexual comments at the workplace to berating voicemails from readers who belittled their knowledge to locker room hassles with male athletes. Such comments appeared to be part of the evolution of the ESPN workplace as well, evidenced by Miller and Shales (2011). The presumptions were that (a) women did not know as much as their men counterparts about the sports they were covering and that (b) they received their jobs either because of their looks or the organizational desire for gender diversity. Women also cited lack of advancement as their top reason for leaving sports journalism, and more women than men dropped out of the field at the early stages of their careers. Schmidt (2013) studied university newspapers, finding that women were underrepresented specifically within sports reporting and also noting that university student journalists were not cognizant of the degree of gender disproportionality. New opportunities have arisen, such as the establishment of espnW, whose coverage is "by women, for women" while covering both women's and men's sport.

GLOBALIZATION AND CHANGE AGENCY

Given the established tendencies that can diminish women in terms of opportunities, representation, and depiction in sport, one could determine that women will always remain in the margins within a larger sporting landscape. Sport can certainly function as a vehicle for social change, and women athletes are particularly in the position of influencing societal perceptions, political realities, and the overall global treatment of women. As Wulf (2009) writes,

If anything, XX-chromosome games are a truer, more meaningful calling than their XY counterparts. Women often have to compete for nothing more than the joy and the love of sport, not the fame and fortune we heap on the men. They usually have to play for their own rewards. [Consider] Yemeni students, running a relay in Sanaa recently. They're not just girls with exotic wardrobes battling heat and aerodynamics. They're literally racing against time, trying to bring their Islamic traditions of modesty into the modern world of gender equality. (p. 16)

We hope this chapter has underscored more than the negatives for women interested in sport, offering the positive trends and relatively newfound recognition of not just women athletes but also women fans, executives, and consumers that represent a newer and broader way of thinking about sport in society (see Walker & Melton, 2015). Gender certainly impacts our understanding of sport at virtually every level, and it is fair to conclude that it remains the most hardwired and perhaps last bastion of the old-boy network. One could see this as discouraging or could, instead, decide that sport is the venue in which the biggest social change could happen for women in the next generation. Regardless of one's standpoint, gender differences and advancements will continue to be negotiated largely from a communication perspective, whether that is through communication-based media, organizations, or social networks.

Suggested Additional Reading

Cahn, S. (2015). *Coming on strong: Gender and sexuality in women's sport* (2nd ed.). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Creedon, P. (2014). Women, social media, and sport: Global digital communication weaves a web. *Television & New Media*, 15, 711-716.

Jones, A., & Greer, J. (2012). Go "heavy" or go home: An examination of audience attitudes and their relationship to gender cues in the 2010 Olympic snowboarding

coverage. *Mass Communication & Society*, 15(4), 598-621.

Mastro, D., Seate, A. A., Blecha, E., & Gallegos, M. (2012). The wide world of sports reporting: The influence of gender- and race-based expectations on evaluations of sports reporters. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89(3), 458-474.

Messner, M. (2009). *It's all for the kids: Gender, families, and youth sports*. Berkeley: University of California Press.