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SEPARATING THE MEN FROM THE GIRLS: The Gendered Language of Televised Sports

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This research compares and analyzes the verbal commentary of televised coverage of two women's and men's athletic events: the "final four" of the women's and men's 1989 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball tournaments and the women's and men's singles, women's and men's doubles, and the mixed-doubles matches of the 1989 U.S. Open tennis tournament. Although we found less overtly sexist commentary than has been observed in past research, we did find two categories of difference: (1) gender marking and (2) a "hierarchy of naming" by gender and, to a certain extent, by race. These differences are described and analyzed in light of feminist analyses of gendered language. It is concluded that televised sports commentary contributes to the construction of gender and racial hierarchies by marking women's sports and women athletes as "other," by infantilizing women athletes (and, to a certain extent, male athletes of color), and by framing the accomplishments of women athletes ambivalently.

Feminist scholars have argued that in the 20th century the institution of sport has provided men with a homosocial sphere of life through which they have bolstered the ideology of male superiority. Through the exclusion of women and the association of males with physical competence, strength, power, and even violence, sport has provided a basis through which men have sought to reconstitute an otherwise challenged masculine hegemony (Bryson 1987; Hall 1988; Kidd 1987; Messner 1988; Theberge 1981; Whitson 1990).

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But, starting with the 1972 passage of Title IX in the United States, athletic participation of school-age girls increased dramatically. In 1971, only 294,015 girls participated in high school sports, compared with 3,666,917 boys. By the 1989-90 academic year, there were 1,858,659 girls participating in high school sports, compared with 3,398,192 boys. Increased numerical participation in sports by girls and women has been accompanied by change in attitudes as well. A nationwide survey found large majorities of parents and children agreeing that "sports are no longer for boys only" (Wilson Sporting Goods Co. and the Women's Sports Foundation 1988, 1). With increases in opportunities for female athletes, including expanded youth programs, better and earlier coaching, and increases in scholarships for college women athletes, some dramatic improvements in female athletic performance have resulted. In fact, the "muscle gap" - the degree of difference between male and female athletic performance in measurable sports like swimming and track and field – has closed considerably in the past 15 years (Crittenden 1979; K. Dyer 1983; Kidd 1990). Sport is still dominated by men at nearly all levels, and still serves to construct culturally dominant ideals of "exemplary masculinity" (Connell 1990, 93). But the dramatic increase in female athleticism in the past two decades directly challenges the assumed naturalness of the equation of men, muscles, and power. In short, the institution of sport has become a "contested terrain" of gender relations and ideologies (Birrell 1987-1988; Messner 1988).

Much of the continued salience of sport as an institutional site for the construction and legitimation of masculine power lies in its role as mass-mediated spectacle (Clarke and Clarke 1982; Hargreaves 1986; Willis 1982). There has been a boom in female athletic participation, but the sports media have been very slow to reflect it. Bryant's (1980) two-year content analysis of two newspapers revealed that only 4.4 percent of total column inches were devoted to coverage of women's sports. Graydon (1983) observed that, in the early 1980s, over 90 percent of sports reporting covered men's sports. Theberge and Cronk (1986) noted that work routines in newspaper sports departments and values of reporters tended to preclude adequate coverage of women's sports. Rintala and Birrell's (1984) analysis of Young Athlete magazine and Duncan and Sayaovong's (1990) examination of Sports Illustrated for Kids magazine revealed that visual images of male athletes in these

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magazines tend to outnumber those of female athletes by a roughly 2:1 ratio. Moreover, text and visual images tend to frame female and male athletes "as fundamentally and essentially different" and, thus, to support stereotypical notions of natural differences between the sexes (Duncan and Sayaovong 1990, 91). In a part of our study (not dealt with in this article), we examined four major metropolitan daily newspapers and found that, over a three-month period in 1990, 81 percent of all sports column inches were devoted exclusively to men's sports, 3.5 percent covered women's sports, and 15.5 percent covered both men's and women's sports or gender-neutral topics. We also examined six weeks of a leading television newscast and found that 92 percent of sports news time was devoted exclusively to men's sports, 5 percent covered women's sports, and 3 percent covered gender-neutral topics. This ignoring or underreporting of existing women's events contributes to the continuation of the invisibility of women athletes in the mass media.

Despite the paucity of coverage of women's sports by the media, there are some recent signs of increased coverage, especially on cable television (Eastman and Meyer 1989). If there is indeed a "window of opportunity" for increased coverage of women's sports on television, the question of how women's and men's sports are covered becomes crucial. To date, very few analyses of the quality of live, televised, play-by-play coverage of women's sports have been conducted. Studies of the 1970s and 1980s revealed that women athletes (when they were reported on television at all) were likely to be overtly trivialized, infantilized, and sexualized (Boutilier and San Giovanni 1983; Duncan 1990; G. Dyer 1987; Felshin 1974). Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) analyzed the quality of verbal and visual coverage of women's basketball, surfing, and marathon and found that even excellent performances by women athletes were commonly framed "ambivalently" by sports commentators:

We found ambivalence in positive portrayals stressing women's strength, skill, or expertise along with negative suggestions that trivialized the women's efforts or implied that they were unsuited to sport (i.e., that they were in some respect weak, inferior, or incapable, that the sports in which they participated were not *true* sports). (P. 18)

This ambivalent framing of women athletes, Duncan and Hasbrook argued, translates into a symbolic denial of power for women.

We were interested in comparing how live, play-by-play television sports commentators talk about women's sports and women athletes with how they talk about men's sports and men athletes. We constructed our research design, in part, from the now-vast feminist literature on gender and language. In short, this literature demonstrates that the ways in which men and women talk—and the ways in which we are talked about—are deeply gendered. For

instance, a woman secretary would likely use the formal "Mr.," along with the last name, when speaking to her male boss, whereas he would probably feel free to refer to her by her first name. This kind of language convention tends to (often subtly) mark gender difference (and, in the above example, social class difference as well) in ways that support and reinforce the power and privilege of "dominants" over "subordinates." The micropolitical realm of face-to-face interaction and language both reflects and constructs the macropolitical realm of unequal power relations between groups (Henley 1977, 1987; Lakoff 1975; Miller and Swift 1976; Schultz 1975; Spender 1980; Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley 1983).

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

We examined two sports for which televised coverage of women's and men's contests could be compared: basketball and tennis. For a number of years, women's tennis has been highly visible on television, but women's college basketball is only recently beginning to be televised (albeit mostly on cable TV, and often on late-night tape delay). We reasoned that a comparison of the more "established" televised sport of tennis with the relative "newcomer" of women's basketball might be revealing.

Live televised coverage of the 1989 women's and men's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) final four basketball tournaments was compared and analyzed. (It should be noted that we chose the "final four," rather than regular-season games because there are so few women's regular season games broadcast on television.) This amounted to three women's games and three men's games, including introductions or lead-ins and halftime shows. We also examined the four final days of televised coverage of the 1989 U.S. Open tennis tournament. Televised coverage consisted of four men's singles matches (two quarterfinals, one semifinal, and the final), three women's singles matches (two semifinals and the final), one men's doubles match (the final), two women's doubles matches (a semifinal and the final), and one mixed-doubles match (the final).

Three general questions guided our analysis: First, do commentators overtly trivialize or sexualize women's sports and individual women athletes in the ways that previous analysts have identified? Second, do sports commentators speak about women's and men's athletic contests differently? In particular, to what extent (if any) are women's and men's events verbally gender marked (e.g., "the women's national championship")? Third, do commentators speak of individual women and men athletes differently? For instance, are women athletes referred to as "girls" or as "women"? Are men athletes referred to as "boys," or as "men"?

First, we recorded the basketball games and tennis matches on videotape and conducted a pilot study of the tapes. The pilot study had two outcomes: First, the research design was fine-tuned, and a preliminary list of specific questions was constructed. Next, we developed standardized ways of analyzing the verbal commentary. Then, the research assistant viewed all of the tapes and compiled a detailed record of her observations. Next, all of the tapes were independently viewed and analyzed by one of the investigators, who then added her written analysis to that of the research assistant. Finally, the data were compiled and analyzed by the two investigators, using both sets of written descriptions of the tapes and by viewing portions of the tapes once again.

Our data revealed very little of the overtly sexist commentary that has been observed in past research. Women's sports and women athletes were not overtly trivialized in tennis or in basketball commentary. And, although camera angles at times may have subtly framed women athletes (especially in tennis) as sexual objects in ways that were not symmetrical with the ways men were framed, the verbal commentary did not frame women in this way. However, we did find two categories of difference in the verbal commentary: (1) gender marking and (2) a "hierarchy of naming" by gender and, to a certain extent, by race.

WOMEN MARKED AS OTHER

In women's basketball, gender was constantly marked, both verbally and through the use of graphics. We were continually reminded that we were watching the "Women's final four," the "NCAA Women's National Championship Game," that these were "some of the best women's college basketball teams," that coach Pat Summit "is a legend in women's basketball," that "this NCAA women's semifinal is brought to you by" Gender was also marked through the use of graphics in the women's games that CBS broadcasted, but not in the ESPN game. The CBS logo marked the women's championship game: "NCAA Women's National Championship," as did their graphics above game scores. ESPN's graphic did not mark gender: "NCAA Semifinal." As Table 1 indicates, over the course of the three women's games, there were 28 instances of graphic and 49 cases of verbal gender marking, for a total of 77 instances of gender marking. This meant that gender was being marked an average of 25.7 times per women's game.

During the women's games, when commentators were discussing the next day's men's games, the men's games were sometimes gender marked (e.g., "the *men's* championship game will be played tomorrow"). But, during the men's basketball games, we observed no instances of gender marking, either

	Verbal	Graphic	Total
Three women's games	49 (16.3)	28 (9.3)	77 (25.7)
Three men's games	0 ` ′	0 `	0

TABLE 1: Gender Marking in Basketball, Totals

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses represent the average per game.

verbal or graphic. Men's games were always referred to as universal, both verbally and in on-screen graphic logos (e.g., "The NCAA National Championship Game," "The Final Four," etc.).

Women's and men's tennis matches were verbally gender marked in a roughly equitable manner (e.g., "men's doubles finals," "women's singles semifinals"). Verbal descriptions of athletes, however, revealed a tendency to gender mark women, not men. For instance, in the mixed-doubles match, the commentators stated several times that Rick Leach is "one of the best doubles players in the world," where Robyn White was referred to as one of "the most animated girls on the circuit." An instance of graphic gender marking in tennis that we found notable was the tendency by CBS to display a pink on-screen graphic for the women's matches and a blue on-screen graphic for the men's matches.

How might we interpret these observations? Stanley (1977) suggests that, although asymmetrical gender marking tends to mark women as "other," symmetrical gender marking is not necessarily oppressive. In fact, she argues that the move toward a totally gender-neutral language may serve to further render women invisible. This would probably be the case if the language of sports reporting and commentary became gender neutral. In fact, in certain cases (in the daily television program, for instance) gender marking is probably necessary to clarify what the viewer will be tuning in to watch. We observed this sort of gender marking in tennis, where women's and men's matches (although not always women and men athletes) were verbally gender marked in a roughly symmetrical manner. The rough symmetry of gender marking in tennis might be explained by the fact that the women's and men's tennis tournaments were being played in the same venue, with coverage often cutting back and forth to women's, men's, and mixed-doubles matches. In this context, symmetrical gender marking probably provides a necessary sense of clarity for the viewers, although the pink (for women) and blue (for men) graphic on-screen logos tended to mark gender in a manner that reinforced conventional gender stereotypes.

In contrast, the women's and men's basketball games were played in different cities, on different nights. And our data revealed a dramatic asymmetry in the commentary: Women's games were verbally and graphically gender marked an average of 25.7 times per game, whereas men's games

101010				
	Verbal	Graphic	Total	_
Three women's games	98 (32.7)	81 (27)	179 (59.7)	
Three men's games	0 .	0	0	

TABLE 2: Gender Marking in Basketball, Including Gender-Marked Team Names
Totals

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses represent the average per game.

were never gender marked. We did not include gender-marked team names (e.g., Lady Techsters, Lady Tigers, Lady Volunteers) in these tabulations because we reasoned that team names are the responsibility of their respective universities, not the networks or commentators. Nevertheless, gendermarked team names have recently been criticized as "contributing to the maintenance of male dominance within college athletics by defining women athletes and women's athletic programs as second class and trivial" (Eitzen and Zinn 1989, 362). In several colleges and universities in recent years, faculty and students have attempted to change gender-marked women's team names (Eitzen and Baca Zinn 1990). In the three women's basketball games that we examined, team names were gender marked 53 times graphically and 49 times verbally (a total of 102 times). As Table 2 reveals, when we add these numbers to our original tabulations, we see that the combination of on-screen graphics, verbal commentary, and team names and logos amounted to a constant barrage of gender marking in the women's games: Gender was marked in some fashion an average of 59.7 times per women's game. In contrast, the men's games were always simply referred to as "the national championship game," and so on. As a result, the men's games and tournament were presented as the norm, the universal, whereas the women's were continually marked as the other, derivative, and, by implication, inferior to the men's.

A GENDERED HIERARCHY OF NAMING

There were stark contrasts between how men athletes and women athletes were referred to by commentators. This was true both in tennis and in basketball. First, and as we had expected, women were commonly referred to as "girls," as "young ladies," and as "women." (Often the naming of women athletes was ambivalent. For instance, Steffi Graf was referred to as "the wonder girl of women's tennis.") In contrast, the male athletes, *never* referred to as "boys," were referred to as "men," "young men," or "young fellas." Second, when athletes were named, commentators used the first

	First Only	Last Only	First and Last
Women Men	304 (52.7) 44 (7.8)	166 (28.8) 395 (69.8)	107 (18.5) 127 (22.4)

TABLE 3: First and Last Name Use in Tennis Commentary, Totals

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses represent percentages.

name only of the women far more commonly than for the men. This difference was most stark in tennis commentary, as revealed in Table 3.

In basketball, the degree of difference in the use of first names of women and men players was not as dramatic, but the pattern was similar. In the three women's basketball games, we counted 31 incidents of women athletes being referred to by their first name only. This occurred 19 times in the men's games.

How do we interpret these differences in how commentators talk about male and female athletes? After these research findings were released at a national press conference, Diana Nyad, one of the USA Network tennis commentators, stated that the difference in first- and last-name use in women's and men's tennis commentary is not due to "sexism" but is simply a result of the fact that the women tennis players are more likely to be "teenaged girls," whereas the men players are likely to be older (Herbert 1990). This was an interesting response, given that in the tennis matches we examined in our study, the range of ages for the male players was 19-29, with the mean age 22.8, and the range of ages for the female players was 19-32, with the mean age 24.0. In the NCAA basketball tournaments, all of the female and male players were college students and roughly the same age. Clearly, actual age differences do not explain commentators' tendency to refer to women athletes as "girls," "young ladies," and by first name only.

Research has demonstrated that dominants (either by social class, age, occupational position, race, or gender) are more commonly referred to by their last names (often prefaced by titles such as Mr.) Dominants generally have license to refer to subordinates (younger people, employees, lower-class people, ethnic minorities, women, etc.) by their first names (Henley 1977; McConnell-Ginet 1978; Rubin 1981; Wolfson and Manes 1980). The practice of referring more "formally" to dominants and more "informally" (or "endearingly") to subordinates linguistically grants the former adult status, while marking the latter in an infantilizing way. And research suggests that these linguistic differences both reflect and (re)construct inequality. For instance, Brannon (1978) had 462 college students read a story describing a female's application for a high-level executive position, in which she was referred to either as a "girl" or as a "woman." Students' ratings of personality

traits described the woman as more tough, brilliant, mature, and dignified, more qualified to be hired, and more deserving of a higher salary than the girl. Similarly, the term *lady* tends to "evoke a standard of propriety, correct behavior, and elegance" (Miller and Swift 1976), and "carries overtones recalling the age of chivalry, implying that women are helpless and cannot do things for themselves," all of which are characteristics that are "decidedly unathletic" (Eitzen and Baca Zinn 1990, 5-6). It can be concluded that tennis commentators' tendency to call women athletes "girls" and "young ladies," and their utilization of the first name only of women athletes (52.7 percent of the time) far more commonly than men athletes (7.8 percent of the time) reflects the lower status of women athletes. Moreover, it is reasonable to speculate that this language is likely to be received by viewers in such a way that it reinforces any already-existing negative attitudes or ambivalences about women's sports and women athletes.

We can only speculate as to why the contrast in gendered patterns of naming was not as stark in basketball as it was in tennis. Perhaps, because female tennis players have traditionally been stereotyped in more conventionally "feminine" ways than other female athletes, there is a greater (probably unconscious) tendency for commentators to view them (and talk about them) in an infantilizing manner. Moreover, women tennis players are often participating in the same venue as the men (and in the case of mixed doubles, in the very same matches with the men), and perhaps this contributes to an unconscious tendency to separate them verbally from the men by naming them differently. In contrast, female basketball players are participating in a traditionally defined "male" sport that requires a good deal of physically aggressive body contact. Perhaps, as a result, commentators are less likely to (again, probably unconsciously) view them and talk about them using conventionally feminine and infantilizing language. And because the women's basketball games are being constantly and thoroughly gender marked, both graphically and verbally, there is little chance that their games will be confused with those of the men. There may therefore be less of a tendency on the part of commentators to differentiate them verbally from the men in terms of how they are named.

In addition to the tendency to infantilize women linguistically while granting men athletes adult status, the quality of commentators' verbal attributions of strength and weakness, success and failure, for women's and men's events also tended to differ. In basketball, verbal attributions of strength to women were often stated in ambivalent language that undermined or neutralized the words conveying power and strength: "big girl," "she's tiny, she's small, but so effective under the boards," "her little jump hook," and so on. A difference in descriptions of basketball coaches was also noted. Joe Ciampi (male) "yells" at his team, whereas Pat Summit (female) was

described twice in the Auburn versus Tennessee game as "screaming" off the bench. Men coaches were not described as screaming, a term that often implies lack of control, powerlessness, even hysteria.

In tennis, "confidence" was very frequently used to describe strength for women, but not so often for men. We speculated that confidence is considered a "given" for men, but an attribute for which women players must constantly strive. Even very strong descriptors, for women, were often framed ambivalently—"That young lady Graf is relentless"—or sexualized—"Sabatini has put together this first set with such naked aggression." And whereas, for women, spectacular shots were sometimes referred to as "lucky," for the men, there were constant references to the imposition of their wills on the games (and on opponents). In men's doubles, for example, "You can feel McEnroe imposing his will all over this court. I mean not just with Woodford but Flach and Seguso. He's just giving them messages by the way he's standing at the net, the way he kind of swaggers between points."

There was little ambivalence in the descriptions of men: These are "big" guys with "big" forehands, who play "big games." There was a constant suggestion of male power and agency in the commentary. Even descriptions of men's weaknesses were commonly framed in a language of agency: "He created his own error" Discussion of men's "nervousness" was often qualified to make it sound like strength and heroism. For instance, early in the match between Becker and Krickstein, the two commentators had this exchange: "They're both pretty nervous, and that's pretty normal." "Something would be wrong if they weren't." "It means you care." "Like Marines going into Iwo Jima saying they weren't nervous, something's a little fishy."

In both basketball and tennis, there were also qualitative differences in the ways that success and failure were discussed for women and men athletes. In fact, two formulas for success appeared to exist, one for men, the other for women. Men appeared to succeed through a combination of talent, instinct, intelligence, size, strength, quickness, hard work, and risk taking. Women also appeared to succeed through talent, enterprise, hard work, and intelligence. But commonly cited along with these attributes were emotion, luck, togetherness, and family. Women were also more likely to be framed as failures due to some combination of nervousness, lack of confidence, lack of being "comfortable," lack of aggression, and lack of stamina. Men were far less often framed as failures — men appeared to miss shots and lose matches not so much because of their own individual shortcomings (nervousness, losing control, etc.) but because of the power, strength, and intelligence of their (male) opponents. This framing of failure suggests that it is the thoughts and actions of the male victor that wins games, rather than suggesting that the loser's lack of intelligence or ability is responsible for losing games. Men were framed as active agents in control of their destinies, women as reactive objects.

A HIERARCHY OF NAMING BY GENDER AND RACE

It was not simply women athletes who were linguistically infantilized and framed ambivalently. Our research suggests that Black male basketball players shared some of this infantilization. Previous research revealed racial bias in televised commentary in men's sports. For instance, Rainville and McCormick (1977) found that white players received more praise and less criticism from football commentators than comparable Black players. And Jackson (1989) reported that white male football and basketball players were much more likely to be credited with "intelligence and hard work," whereas the successes of their Black male counterparts were more likely to be attributed to "natural athleticism." Our examination of basketball commentary occurred in the wake of widespread public discussion of Jackson's (1989) research. We observed what appeared to be a conscious effort on the part of commentators to cite both physical ability and intelligence when discussing successful Black and white male and female players. However, this often appeared to be an afterthought. For instance, a commentator would note of a star white player that "he has so much court intelligence . . . AND so much natural ability!" And a typical comment about a Black star player was "What a great athlete . . . AND he really plays the game intelligently!"

Although it appeared that television commentators were consciously attempting to do away with the "hard work/intelligence" (white) versus "natural athlete" (Black) dichotomy, we did find an indication of racial difference in the naming of male basketball players. In the three men's basketball games, in each of the cases in which men were referred to by their first names only, the commentators were referring to men of color (e.g., Rumeal [Robinson], Ramon [Ramos]). Although there were several "star" white male basketball players (e.g., Danny Ferry and Andrew Gaze) in these games, they were *never* referred to by their first names only.

These findings suggest that TV sports commentators are (again, probably unconsciously) utilizing a "hierarchy of naming": At the top of the linguistic hierarchy sit the always last-named white "men," followed by (sometimes) first-named Black "men," followed by (frequently) first-named "girls" and "young ladies." We found no racial differences in the ways that women athletes were named. We speculate that (at least within televised sports commentary) gender is the dominant defining feature of women athletes' shared subordinate status. In contrast, sports commentary tends to weave a taken-for-granted superordinate, adult masculine status around male athletes. Yet, in the case of male athletes of color, the commentary tends to (subtly and partially) undermine their superordinate masculine status. This suggests, following the theory of gender stratification developed by Connell (1987) and applied to sport by Messner (1989), Messner and Sabo (1990), and Kidd (1987), that sports media reinforce the overall tendency of sport to be an

institution that simultaneously (1) constructs and legitimizes men's overall power and privilege over women and (2) constructs and legitimizes heterosexual, white, middle-class men's power and privilege over subordinated and marginalized groups of men.

CONCLUSION

An individual who watches an athletic event constructs and derives various meanings from the activity. These meanings result from a process of interaction between the meanings that are built into the game itself (the formal rules and structure, as well as the history and accumulated mythology of the game), with the values, ideologies, and presuppositions that the viewer brings to the activity of watching. But viewing an athletic contest on television is not the same as watching a contest "live." Televised sport is an event that is mediated by the "framing" of the contest by commentators and technical people (Clarke and Clarke 1982; Duncan and Brummet 1987; Gitlin 1982; Gruneau 1989; Jhally 1989; Morse 1983; Wenner 1989). Thus any meanings that a television viewer constructs from the contest are likely to be profoundly affected by the framing of the contest (Altheide and Snow 1979; Antin 1982; Conrad 1982; Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Fiske and Hartley 1978; Innis 1951; McLuhan 1964; Morse 1983).

Televised sports are live and largely unscripted, but the language that commentators use to frame the events tends to conform to certain linguistic conventions that are themselves a result of "a complex articulation of technical, organizational, economic, cultural, political, and social factors" (Jhally 1989, 84). In our study, the sex of the commentators did not appear to make a difference in how they linguistically framed gender. Both female and male commentators tended to gender mark and infantilize women athletes in roughly the same ways, and to the same extent. As Gruneau (1989) has argued, although commentators are often aware of themselves as "storytellers," they are not necessarily aware of the political and ideological ramifications of the linguistic conventions to which they—apparently unconsciously—conform.

Language is never neutral. An analysis of language reveals embedded social meanings, including overt and covert social biases, stereotypes, and inequities. There is an extensive body of literature that documents how language both reflects and reinforces gender inequalities (Baron 1986; Henley 1977, 1987; Lakoff 1975; Miller and Swift 1976, 1980; Schultz 1975; Spender 1980; Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley 1983; Van Den Bergh 1987). In a recent study of the gendered language of sport, sociologists Eitzen and Baca Zinn (1989) argue that

[gendered] language places women and men within a system of differentiation and stratification. Language suggests how women and men are to be evaluated. Language embodies negative and positive value stances and valuations related to how certain groups within society are appraised. Language in general is filled with biases about women and men. Specific linguistic conventions are sexist when they isolate or stereotype some aspect of an individual's nature or the nature of a group of individuals based on their sex. (P. 364)

The media—and sports media in particular—tend to reflect the social conventions of gender-biased language. In so doing, they reinforce the biased meanings built into language and, thus, contribute to the re-construction of social inequities.

Newspaper editors and television programmers often argue that they are simply "giving the public what it wants." Programming decisions are clearly circumscribed by market realities, and, with few exceptions, men's athletic events tend to draw more spectators than women's. But one question that arises concerns the reciprocal effect of, on the one hand, public attitudes, values, and tastes, and, on the other hand, the quantity and quality of coverage of certain kinds of athletic events. What comes first: public "disinterest" in televised women's athletics or lack of quality coverage? Perhaps a more timely question now that women's sports are getting at least incrementally more coverage is, How do the ways that women's and men's sports are covered on television affect public interest in these events?

Our research on women's and men's tennis and basketball coverage indicated that commentators today are less likely than their predecessors to sexualize or trivialize women athletes overtly. However, the language used by commentators tends to mark women's sports and women athletes as other, infantilize women athletes, and frame their accomplishments negatively or ambivalently. Our research also suggests that Black male athletes share in some of the linguistic infantilization that is commonly used to describe women athletes. As a result, the language of sports commentary tends to (often subtly) re-construct gender and racial hierarchies.

Although subtle bias is no less dangerous than overt sexism, the decline of overtly sexist language suggests that some commentators are becoming more committed to presenting women's athletics fairly. For instance, women's basketball commentator Steve Physioc renamed "man-to-man defense" as "player-to-player" defense. This is an example of a conscious decision to replace androcentric language with language that is not gendered. Although Physioc did not do this consistently, the fact that he did it at all was an indication of his awareness of the gender biases built into the conventional language of sports. Critics might argue that changing language subverts the history or the "purity" of the game. But, in fact, terminology used to describe sports is constantly changing. For instance, in basketball, the part of the court

nearest the basket that used to be called "the key" through the 1950s was renamed "the lane" in the 1960s and is more recently referred to as "the paint" or "the block." These changes have come about as a result of changes in the rules of the game, changes in the sizes and styles of players, and general changes in social values and mores. But language does not simply change as a reflection of changing social realities. Language also helps to construct social reality (Shute 1981; Van Den Bergh 1987). Thus the choice to use nonsexist language is a choice to affirm linguistically the right of women athletes to fair and equal treatment. Viewed in this context, Physioc's use of "player-to-player defense" can be viewed as a linguistic recognition that something significant has happened to basketball: It is no longer simply a men's game. There are women players out there, and the language used to report their games should reflect and endorse this fact.

NOTES

- 1. These statistics are complied yearly by the National Federation of State High School Associations in Kansas City, MO. The 1989-90 statistics were received via a phone interview with the federation. For a discussion of the implications of this continuing trend of increasing high school athletic participation by girls, see Sabo (1988).
- 2. Women have only recently appeared on television as sports commentators and still represent a very small proportion of this profession. Thus, although some analysts have observed instances of women sports commentators resisting or objecting to sexist commentary by their male colleagues (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988), it is probably premature to expect them to have effected any significant change in the ways women's sports are reported. As Kanter (1977) argued, a significant proportion of any profession must be female before we might expect a dramatic change in the culture of that profession. Until many more women move into sports commentary, we can expect the few that do exist to remain marginalized and compartmentalized in ways that do not challenge the business-as-usual gendering of televised sports. But, as Yoder (1991) warns, increasing numbers of women (beyond tokenism) in traditionally male occupations often leads to a defensive backlash (sexual harassment, etc.) by men, some of which has already occurred in newspaper sports reporting.

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