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TRENDS

SILENCE, SPORTS BRAS, AND WRESTLING PORN

Women in Televised Sports News and Highlights Shows

Michael A. Messner
Margaret Carlisle Duncan
Cheryl Cooky

This study of televised sports news on three network affiliates and ESPN's SportsCenter extends and expands on earlier studies in 1990 and 1994 to examine the quality and quantity of televised coverage of women's sports. The dominant finding over the decade spanned by the three studies is the lack of change. Women's sports are still "missing in action" on the nightly news, and are even less visible on SportsCenter. Textual analysis revealed some change over the decade, but mostly showed continued gender asymmetries in televised sports news and highlight shows: (a) the choice to devote a considerable proportion of the already-thin coverage of women's sports to humorous feature stories on nonserious women's sports, and (b) the (often humorous) sexual objectification of athlete women and nonathlete women. The authors conclude with a discussion of how and why television has continued to cautiously follow, rather than lead or promote, the growth in girls' and women's sports.

Keywords: *televised sports; gender; sports news*

In the summer of 1999, during the highly celebrated run by the U.S. women's soccer team toward an eventual World Cup victory, a news reporter called one of the authors of this article and asked, "Do you think that the tremendous attention that these women are getting will spill over into greater media coverage of women's sports in general?" The answer to this was simple: "Well, that depends on you, doesn't it?"

In fact, during that exciting moment for women's sports in the United States, we were collecting data for a study on gender in televised sports that focused, among other things,¹ on the quantity and quality of televised sports news on three Los Angeles network affiliates, and on ESPN SportsCenter (Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, 2000). Because the 1999 data reported in this article came from samples taken before and after the Women's World Cup, we can comment on any short-term "spillover effect."

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And because we had previously collected data on the same LA network affiliate news shows for studies in 1989 and 1993 (Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, 1990, 1994), we can reflect on changes and continuity in the quality and quantity women's sports coverage over the decade.²

THE STUDY

We analyzed 6 weeks of televised sports news (both the 6:00 p.m. evening segments and the 11:00 p.m. late night segments) on the three local network affiliates (KNBC, KCBS, and KABC).³ As in the 1990 and 1994 studies, in order to sample different time periods when different sports were being played, we analyzed three, 2-week periods: March 15 to 28, July 12 to 25, November 8 to 21. In all, we examined 251 sports news broadcasts on the three network affiliates, totaling slightly more than 15 hours of air time. Amounts of air time devoted to men's versus women's sports were measured. In addition to the quantitative measures, we analyzed the quality of coverage in terms of visuals and verbal commentary.

We also analyzed 3 weeks of one-hour, 11:00 p.m. ESPN "SportsCenter" shows. These 3 weeks corresponded with the first week of each of the three network news segments: March 15 to 21, July 12 to 18, and November 8 to 14. In all, we examined 21 SportsCenter broadcasts, totaling slightly more than 17 hours of air time. In addition to the quantitative measures, we analyzed the quality of coverage in terms of visuals and verbal commentary.

The research design and methods of data collection and analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) were identical to those of the 1990 and 1994 studies. First, we taped all of the sports news and highlights segments; second, a research assistant viewed all of the tapes and compiled a written preliminary analysis; third, one investigator independently viewed all of the tapes and added her written analysis to that of the research assistant; and 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.

TV NEWS: WOMEN ATHLETES STILL MISSING IN ACTION

The most striking finding of our analysis of the quantity and quality of coverage of women's sports in the news broadcasts was the lack of change over the decade. In the 1990 and 1994 studies, we noted that female athletes rarely received coverage on the televised sports news. The new study reveals only a slight increase in the proportion of sports news devoted to coverage of women's sports and women athletes over the 10-year time period, as indicated in Table 1.

The three network affiliates showed very similar patterns of coverage, but Table 1 shows that there were also differences among them, with KNBC showing the highest proportion of coverage of women's sports, and KCBS the lowest.

TABLE 1
Percentage of 1999 Sports News, by Gender, on Three Network Affiliates

	KNBC	KABC	KCBS
Men's sports	86.7	87.1	91.8
Women's sports	10.6	8.6	5.8
Both/neutral	3.1	4.1	2.4

There were several occasions where 3 or 4 days went by without news commentators uttering a single mention of women's sports. Slightly more than half of the 251 newscasts we examined on the three stations contained no coverage of women's sports whatsoever. However, this represented an improvement over 1993, when 70% of broadcasts contained no women's sports coverage.

In 1993, we found that there was almost no coverage of women's sports on weekdays. We found the 1999 pattern to be similar, but not as extreme: again, news reports on women's sports were significantly condensed into expanded-format weekend shows (nearly half of the stories on women's sports [78 of 160] appeared on Saturdays or Sundays, and 45% of the total air time given to coverage of women's sports during the week appeared on Saturdays or Sundays). Despite the fact that weekday coverage of women's sports remains very thin, the amount of such coverage we observed in 1999 represented a noticeable increase over 1993, when there was almost no weekday coverage of women's sports, especially from Mondays through Wednesdays, and roughly 74% of the total time allotted to the coverage of women's sports was on expanded-format Sunday broadcasts.

In 1999, as in the two previous studies, the sheer number of network news stories on men's sports (918) far eclipsed the women's stories (160). As Table 2 illustrates, the proportion of stories on women's sports that were accompanied by an interview with a woman athlete or coach, or by visual footage fell only slightly short of the proportions in men's coverage. This is an improvement over 1993, when women's sports stories were accompanied by interviews only 7% of the time.

Dividing the sample into three separate 2-week time periods (March 15-28, July 12-25, and November 8-21) allowed us to sample variations in coverage of women's sports by season. Of the total 78.2 minutes of coverage of women's sports, 34.6 occurred in the March sample, 30.4 in the July sample, and only 13.2 in November. This asymmetrical seasonal distribution reflected the general pattern found in the previous studies.

QUALITATIVE GENDER ASYMMETRIES ON THE SPORTS NEWS

The quantitative data indicate a continued underreporting of women's sports; a qualitative analysis of the ways that women and men are presented on the sports news reveals further gender asymmetries. Two themes that persisted from the previous studies were (a) the choice to devote a

TABLE 2

Total Number of 1999 Stories, Visuals, and Interviews

	Number of Stories	With Visuals	With Interviews
Men's sports	918	800 87%	232 25%
Women's sports	160	124 78%	34 21%

considerable proportion of the already-thin coverage of women's sports to humorous feature stories on nonserious women's sports, and (b) the (often humorous) sexual objectification of athlete women and nonathlete women.

As in the 1989 and 1993 studies, we found in 1999 that although most of the few reports on serious women's sports (like basketball, tennis, golf or soccer) were fairly brief, the occasional more in-depth women's sports story was often a gag feature or a story on a marginal, but visually entertaining, pseudosport. For instance, on March 17, KCBS did a "last laugh" segment, and KABC spent 39 seconds during each of its two broadcasts featuring a "Nude Bungee Jumping" story. KABC showed a film clip of the nude woman, strategically painted with St. Patrick's Day green shamrocks, leaping from a bridge, as the commentator asked, "Do we have to slow that down?" When interviewed, the bungee jumper said "That was amazing. I will remember it forever," to which the commentator replied, "And so will we," as co-anchors laughed along with him.

Similarly, Both KNBC and KABC offered up March 23 feature stories on the wrestler/model Sable. Sable was aiming to promote World Wrestling Federation (WWF) wrestling, but reporters emphasized her scanty, dominatrix-style attire and the fact that she had appeared in *Playboy* magazine. KNBC devoted 27 seconds at 6 p.m. and 21 seconds at 11 p.m. to Sable and reported on no other women's sports during those shows. Sable was shown at a photo shoot (not wrestling), as KNBC's commentator noted, "As you can see, Sable doesn't keep much behind the scenes herself." KABC's coverage of Sable was even more in-depth. In fact, its 6 p.m. story on Sable was, at 2 minutes and 48 seconds, the longest single news story on women's sports in our 1999 sample (the 11 p.m. story on Sable was trimmed, but still very long, at 1:15). KABC's commentator invited viewers into this story by stating, "We're your source for wrestling porn." He then described Sable as a "sexy villainess," and insulted her in an interview by asking if she could count to 10. When, with a disgusted look on her face, she did so, the commentator countered, "Ah, yes: beauty and brains." He went on to joke approvingly about Sable's appearance in *Playboy*, and after a film clip of her wrestling (in slow motion in a bikini), he concluded by saluting and saying "Sable, a champion of women's rights. We salute her." KABC then managed to squeeze a 10-second report on women's tennis in to the 11 p.m. show, but the Sable story otherwise represented all coverage of "women's sports" that day.

The "wrestling porn" comment about Sable seems to express an unstated policy at KABC and other network affiliates: part of the entertainment of sports news shows is the opportunity they present for viewers to engage in sexual voyeurism. The producers supply the images, and the commentators supply the locker-room humor. For instance, on March 17, KNBC's commentator discussed the National Football League's (NFL) decision to once again allow referees to use an instant replay to review on-field decisions. "The problem," he deadpanned as viewers were shown a clip of referees huddled around a monitor, "[is] what will the referees actually be looking at: the play, or as we found out, something else?" Next, viewers got a peek at what the referees were supposedly watching on the monitor: a Victoria's Secret Fashion show, and a clip of the movie "Eyes Wide Shut," with Tom Cruise kissing Nicole Kidman, while both appear naked.

This sort of humorous invitation to engage in sexual voyeurism dovetails thematically with the trivialization of women as athletes. In the mid-July aftermath of the dramatic World Cup Championship by the U.S. soccer team, KCBS and KABC focused less on the accomplishments of the team, and instead continued to reintroduce the story about soccer star Brandi Chastain's having, at the moment of victory, stripped off her jersey, revealing her sports bra. KCBS's July 13 report included a remark that "Nike plans to Market [Chastain's] sports bra." Nearly 11 days later, this theme was still familiar enough to fuel a joke in a report on men's sports. In a humorous feature on the New York Yankees' David Cone, who had just pitched a perfect game, comedian David Letterman was shown saying that one way to pitch a perfect game is "After each strike you rip off your jersey and run around in a black sports bra." KABC's commentator seemed even less able to resist the Chastain sports bra story. Three days in a row, he made joking references to this story. On July 15, he reported that "Today, the ponytail express stopped in Midtown Manhattan, where it was announced that Nike will exploit Brandi Chastain's strip tease by fashioning her to a line of sports bras." The next day, he noted that the women soccer players' "ponytail express" appeared in a golf tournament and that Chastain managed to keep her shirt on but "took off her sweater during warm-ups." And then on the next day, in a humorous spoof on the film *Eyes Wide Shut*, KABC included a clip of Chastain in her sports bra as part of a collage of half-clothed people. Said the commentator, "It seems like Hollywood is really influencing the sports world. Everybody's getting naked. I'm not complaining. That's just the way it is."

KABC's penchant for humorous sexual objectification of women athletes was not confined to soccer players. A November 15 story on a tennis match between Mary Pierce and Ana Kournikova focused typically on Kournikova's image as a sexually attractive young woman. Noting her boyfriend in the crowd, the commentator said, "That's what it takes to date Ana Kournikova: you have to be willing to go watch her play in the afternoon and then fly across the country and play yourself at night. . . . And it's well worth it, I think most would agree." He and the anchorperson then shared a knowing laugh.

If women athletes do not supply enough material for sexual titillation, there is a supporting cast of nonathlete women who are available for humorous voyeurism. Two of the three network affiliates (KNBC twice, KABC five times) continued the time-tested tradition of focusing on shots of young bikini-clad women in the sun-drenched stands of baseball games, often adding their own tongue-in-cheek comments about the women's attractiveness. For instance, on July 18, KABC's commentator enthusiastically said "Helloooooo Pittsburgh!" while viewers were treated to a shot of a woman in the stands. The next day, as viewers saw an image of a blonde woman in a crop-top, the same commentator said, "Speaking of perfect, it was a perfect day today in Anaheim."

Sexually humorous stories and references to other women in supportive nonathlete roles were sprinkled throughout the news reports. KNBC took up nearly 3 minutes of combined broadcast time on its two July 25 broadcasts reporting on "Laker Girl" (cheerleader) tryouts: among other things, viewers learned that it was the job of these "sizzling beauties" to "Sex it up" on television. Similarly, on July 16, KABC's commentator shared a laugh about the "new pit crew" at a Harrah's Casino-sponsored auto racing show. As two of the Casino's model/dancers posed as though fixing the car, the commentator quipped, "There's something about show girls. Who doesn't love showgirls?" Another anchor chimed in about the car's driver, "He could just quit driving now," to which the sports commentator replied, "He could. Yeah. Because why do you drive fast? To get girls. He's got them. He's done. He can retire!" The segment ended with shared laughter.

INSTANCES OF GENDER SYMMETRY AND FAIRNESS

There were a few moments of fair and equitable coverage of women's sports during the 6 weeks of network news that we examined. And these moments were distributed unevenly across the three network affiliates. Although the quantity of KABC's coverage of women's sports fell between that of the other two network affiliates, the quality of its coverage tended much more toward trivialization of women athletes and sexualized humor and put-downs of women in general. And although KCBS had the lowest proportional coverage of women's sports, of the three network affiliates, the quality of their coverage of women's sports tended to be more respectful, and they engaged in noticeably fewer sexualized putdowns of women in general. KCBS showed instances (though not a consistent pattern) of high-quality, respectful, coverage of women's sports. For instance, a March 15 report on the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) women's basketball game was a straightforward, respectful characterization of the Lady Bruins as a team that "dominates inside and outside." On July 24, KNBC gave examples of equitable and inequitable coverage on the 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. broadcasts, respectively. At 6 p.m., they delivered the following sequence of stories: a 1 minute and 52 second story on men's major league baseball with visual game footage; 38 seconds on women's basketball, with visual game footage; 30 seconds on men's basketball, with visual game footage; 24 seconds on

men's golf, with visual game footage; 28 seconds on women's tennis, with visual game footage; 25 seconds on men's cycling, with visual game footage; and finally a 36-second segment on women's golf, with visual game footage. In the 11 p.m. report though, they reverted to form, offering only a single 6-second long story on women's basketball (with no visual game footage), sandwiched between longer stories on men's baseball, basketball, cycling, surfing, football, golf, and again baseball.

THREE WEEKS OF ESPN SPORTSCENTER

The Los Angeles network affiliate sports news commentators have only a few minutes of time each night to report on what they decide are the key sports events of the day. By contrast, ESPN's SportsCenter producers have a full hour of programming to work with (minus time devoted to commercials). One might expect, therefore, to find a wider range of coverage of women's sports on SportsCenter shows. As Table 3 illustrates, we actually found the opposite: there was proportionately less coverage of women's sports on SportsCenter than on the network affiliates' news shows. Where on network news, men's sports reports outnumbered women's sports stories by a 6 to 1 ratio, SportsCenter's male-to-female sports stories ratio was a whopping 15 to 1. The percentage of time devoted to women's sports was also lower on SportsCenter (2.2%) compared with network affiliate news reports (8.7%)

In addition to offering fewer women's sports stories, SportsCenter's coverage of women's sports fell short of the network affiliates' coverage in other ways. Where 21% of network affiliate women's sports reports were accompanied by an interview with a woman athlete or coach, only one single interview with a woman (basketball player Lisa Leslie, after winning the most valuable player award in the WNBA All Star Game) occurred in the SportsCenter sample. By contrast, nearly one fourth of SportsCenter's 551 stories on men's sports were accompanied by an interview (often, indeed, by multiple interviews) with a male athlete or coach.

"TEASERS" AND LEAD STORIES

Sports news and highlights shows make a statement about what they consider "real" sports—or the most important sports—by the amount of time devoted to coverage of various sports, and by the production values committed to coverage of various sports. They also actively build audience interest and anticipation for some sports (and not for others) in two ways: First, during nonsports parts of news shows, and before commercial breaks during SportsCenter, they give "previews" of what they will be covering next; and second, they set the tone for each broadcast by strategically choosing what story will be their "lead story."

Previews, often known as "teasers," are intended to hold an audience through a commercial break, in anticipation of an exciting or important report. Table 4 shows that previews for the sports news segments followed

TABLE 3

Minutes and Proportion of Sports News, by Gender, on ESPN SportsCenter

	Number of Stories	Total Minutes	Percent of total minutes
Men's sports	551	991.8	96.7
Women's sports	24	22.1	2.2
Both/neutral	10	11.9	1.1

the same general pattern of the proportions of coverage allotted to men's and women's sports.

Similar to other categories of coverage, ESPN's SportsCenter once again fell far behind the network affiliates in terms of the proportion of previews (2%) that were devoted to women's sports. There were also some differences among the network affiliates in terms of how much preview time they allotted to pitching an upcoming women's sports story, with KABC leading the way with 14.8% of its preview time on women's sports and KCBS below the average with only 6.7%. However, when we examine the quality of these previews, we see that much of KABC's previews were not intended to inform the viewer of an upcoming story that reported on a serious women's sporting event. Instead, a large proportion of these women's sports previews appear to have been aimed at sexually and humorously titillating the viewer. For instance, during the July sample period, of the total 83 seconds of "women's sports" previews on KABC, 23 seconds were for an upcoming story on "nude bungee jumping," and 11 seconds to pitch an upcoming story on the wrestler/model Sable. On this March 23 preview, viewers saw an image of Sable posing in thigh-high, high-heeled leather boots, a black silver studded bikini top and black hot pants. KABC's commentator invited the viewers to stay tuned by stating, "She poses in *Playboy* and wrestles professionally. It's the woman my mother dreamed about for me, and I'll talk to her later in sports." Even when they decided to preview a serious women's sport, the form was sometimes humorous sexualization. For instance, one of the two KABC previews in the November sample gave new meaning to the term *teaser*, focusing on tennis player Ana Kournikova (an athlete often given disproportionate media coverage not simply for her athletic performances but because she is seen as sexually attractive): "How's this for a tease?", the commentator says to viewers, "What it takes to successfully date Ana Kournikova." The other commentators exclaim, "Ooooooh!" as they cut to a commercial.

As Table 5 shows, nearly all of the news shows began with a lead story on a men's sport. Lead stories set the tone for each broadcast by showing upfront what is considered to be the most important story. Also—and this is most evident on ESPN—they are usually the longest stories, with the highest production values (graphics, interviews, game footage, musical montage,

TABLE 4
Previews on Network Affiliates and SportsCenter (in seconds)

	KNBC	%	KABC	%	KCBS	%	SportsCenter	%
Men's sports	739	88.3	934	85.1	828	93.3	3,080	98
Women's sports	93	11.1	163	14.8	59	6.7	62	2
Both/neutral	5	0.6		0		0		0

etc.). July SportsCenters usually began with a baseball story, including taped game footage, on-the-spot coverage from ESPN reporters, interviews, and so on. These opening sequences lasted from 6 to 14 minutes. March openers usually included long NBA or men's NCAA basketball sequences. November openers usually included long NFL or NBA sequences.

Four of the eight women's sports lead stories that did appear on the three network affiliates had a local angle: the UCLA women's basketball team's progress in the NCAA tournament during the March segment. The other four lead women's stories appeared during the July segment, and were devoted to following up on the then-recent U.S. Women's Soccer Team's World Cup victory. There were no lead stories on women's sports during the November segment of the sample.

RACE AND GENDER COMPOSITION OF COMMENTATORS

The sports news shows on the three network affiliates, and ESPN's SportsCenter, evidenced far greater racial diversity than sexual diversity among the commentators. As Table 6 shows, a respectable 38.7% of the shows we studied were anchored or co-anchored by Black, Latino/a, or Asian American commentators. By contrast, only 3.2% of these programs were anchored or co-anchored by women. The paucity of women commentators in sports news and highlight shows echoes the small proportion of these shows that are devoted to coverage of women's sports.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The beginning of the 21st century is a time of tremendous opportunity for the growth and development of girls and women's sports in the United States. The close of the 1990s witnessed the introduction of women's professional basketball, and the highly celebrated success of the world champion U.S. women's soccer team. These high-profile professional successes are but the tip of a huge iceberg of growth in sport participation among girls and women over the past 30 years (Acosta & Carpenter, 1998; Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994).

The industry of televised sports has been far from a leader in this historic explosion of women's sports. Our studies suggest that television has continued to cautiously follow, rather than lead or promote, the growth in girls' and women's sports. At best, televised sports has offered sporadic,

TABLE 5
1999 Lead Stories

	KNBC	KABC	KCBS	Sports Center	Total	%
Men's sports	83	80	80	21	264	97.1
Women's sports	1	4	3	0	8	2.9

TABLE 6
Race and Gender of Anchors or Co-Anchors on
Sports News and Highlights Shows

	WM	BM	LM	AM	WF	BF	LF	AF
KNBC	56		26					
KABC	59			23				
KCBS	23	45						6
SportsCenter	33	10			3			
Totals	171	55	26	23	3	0	6	0
Percentage of total	60.2	19.4	9.2	8.1	1.1	0	2.1	0

NOTE: WM = White males; BM = Black males; LM = Latinos; AM = Asian Pacific males; WF = White females; BF = Black females; LF = Latinas; AF = Asian Pacific females.

token, and marginal coverage of women's sports, while continuing to aggressively build audiences for lavishly produced men's sports (Duncan & Messner, 1998; Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). At worst, television has simply ignored women's sports and continued to reinforce the myth that sport is an exclusively male realm (Creedon, 1998; Kane & Lenskyj, 1998; McKay, Messner, & Sabo, 2000; Sabo & Jansen, 1998).

This study points to evidence of some improvement in the coverage of women's sports in the decade spanning the three studies. But despite some improvements, televised coverage of women's sports is quantitatively still very thin, and qualitatively still suffers generally from lower production values, and from some commentators' negative or ambivalent values about women and athleticism.

The coverage of women's sports on network affiliate news is still very sparse. Given the size of our sample, the small increase since 1993 in the proportion of news time devoted to coverage of women's sports is not terribly significant. Moreover, the quality of coverage of women's sports—especially the tendency to spend more time and resources reporting on nonserious, sexualized, and/or humorous women athletes or events, suggests a lack of commitment by the network affiliates to any principle of fair and equitable

coverage of women's sports. To be sure, there are some minor signs of progress, but our data most clearly illustrates both the snail's pace of growth in quantitative coverage of women's sports, and the continued lack of respect for women's sports—and often, for women in general—that is evidenced on all three sports news shows.

ESPN's SportsCenter devoted an even lower proportion of time to coverage of women's sports than did the network affiliate news shows. The finding in this study that SportsCenter devoted only 2.2% of its air time to covering women athletes and women's sports was consistent with findings in other recent studies (Eastman & Billings, 2000). SportsCenter's ironic, often snide humorous style, described by one scholar as "cool as the other side of the pillow" (Farred, 2000), has successfully set the tone for the growth of other sports highlights shows that also appear to offer up a standard staple of men's baseball, men's basketball, men's football, with occasional smidgens of men's hockey, auto racing, and some golf and tennis. Women's sports are rarely included, and if they are, they usually appear as an afterthought. SportsCenter offers viewers a consistent, almost seamless vision of sport as an exclusive territory set up by and for men (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000).

One might presume that spending more than 88% of the air time on network affiliates' sports news shows, and close to 97% of SportsCenter air time reporting on men's sports simply reflects the reality that there are far more men's sports to cover. Indeed, during the three 2-week segments of televised news, and 3 weeks of SportsCenter that we examined, there were more men's sports taking place than women's sports. This was especially true during the July and November segments, when two men's professional sports for which there is currently no women's counterpart—professional baseball and professional football, respectively—dominated the sportscasts. So it should not be surprising to see more coverage of men's than women's sports. However, we should consider three additional facts: First, during the March news segment, women's NCAA basketball was in season, but there was almost no coverage of this on the news and highlights shows. Second, during the July news segment, the WNBA was in season, but the games were almost never mentioned on the news and highlights shows. Third, the July news segment fell in the period of the immediate aftermath of the highly celebrated World Cup victory of the U.S. women's soccer team. With the exception of a few humorously sexualized follow-up stories on what came to be known as the "Brandi Chastain Sports Bra Story," there was very little follow-up on this story. And, significantly, there was no noticeable "spillover effect" in terms of increased news or SportsCenter coverage of women's sports in the immediate aftermath of the women's World Cup championship. In fact, the most striking outcome of this event was how quickly the network affiliates and ESPN SportsCenter returned to the business-as-usual coverage of men's sports.

The gatekeepers of televised sports news and highlights have continued to choose to allot a disproportionately high amount of coverage to men's

sports. Although girls' and women's sports are booming as never before, the continued lack of coverage of women's sports on these news and highlights shows amounts to the continuation of what Gerbner (1978) called the "symbolic annihilation" of women in the media. As we argued in our 1990 and 1994 research reports, we live in a media-driven society. Despite the actual proliferation of women's sports, if it is not covered in the mass media, we can conclude that in a very real way, it simply did not "happen."

Against this backdrop of near-silence concerning women's sports, it is especially important to examine how women are shown and talked about, on the rare occasion that they do come into focus on television news and highlights shows. In 1999, we once again found that women (both athletes and spectators) were quite commonly used by commentators as the brunt of sexualized jokes. That producers chose to focus their few moments of "in-depth" women's sports coverage joking about (and at times insulting) the scantily-clad wrestler-model Sable and a female "nude bungee jumper," highlighting the "Laker Girls" cheerleaders, joking about what one has to do to "date" tennis player Ana Kournikova, rehashing the Brandi Chastain "sports bra" story, and delivering visual moments of sexual voyeurism peppered with locker-room humor, says volumes about the network affiliates' and ESPN's assumptions about who their audiences are and what they want to see. The producers of these shows seem to assume that their viewers are predominantly heterosexual men who (a) do not want to see or hear any serious, respectful reporting of women's sports and (b) find pleasure in sexual voyeurism and sexualized jokes about women (Duncan & Brummett, 1989). However, and this is especially true of the network affiliate news shows, we wonder how this narrow approach to sports news reporting may cause many viewers of these evening and late-night news shows simply to tune out when the sports reports begin. In other words, we suspect that the lack of coverage of women's sports, along with the often insulting treatment of women in general in these shows leads to a dramatic *narrowing* of what is otherwise a very diverse audience for televised news shows. We speculate that an increase in professional, respectful, and equitable coverage of women's sports on these shows would actually hold the large, diverse audience that has tuned in to the news shows.

Sports commentary remains a world dominated by men (96.5% of the commentators in our sample), who serve up a staple of images and commentary that reinforces the idea that sports are a man's world (indeed, a *heterosexual* man's world). Further research might explore the extent to which there are connections between the patterns of *what* sports are deemed worthy of televised coverage, *how* women's and men's sports are variously covered, and *who* is put in the positions of authority to deliver the commentary.

NOTES

1. Though we look only at the data from news and highlights shows here, the research also examined televised coverage of the U.S. Open Tennis tournament, the NCAA

basketball women's and men's "final fours," and WNBA and NBA championship series playoff games.

2. We did not look at ESPN's SportsCenter in the previous two studies, however.
3. In the 1990 study, we examined only KNBC. In subsequent studies, we added the two other local network affiliates.

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