

# this revolution is not being televised

*American women have flooded into sports at all levels in the last several decades—but you would never know it from watching the evening news.*

Well, if you're like me, these are going to be three great days," gushed the news anchor on Los Angeles's KCBS evening news, as he introduced the sports report and passed the anchor to Jim Hill (who was reporting live, courtside from Staples Center before a Lakers' game). "We got the Lakers tonight, we've got March Madness on Thursday and Friday. Jim, it doesn't get any better than this!" As predicted, that evening's sports news focused entirely on men's college and pro basketball, with a short interlude for men's ice hockey.

The sports news reports over the next few evenings offered plenty of men's NBA and men's NCAA basketball stories, and each included a token men's ice hockey story. All the reports ignored women's sports. Apparently, neither the women's professional golf (LPGA) tournament, women's NCAA basketball, nor any other women's sports taking place on those days were important enough to interrupt the excitement of "three great days" of men's basketball and hockey.

These three evenings in 2004 reflect a broader absence of women's sports from news and highlights shows. The news anchor's apparent throwaway opening comment, "If you're like me ..." is especially telling. Nearly all the sports anchors and ancillary reporters, in the weeks of sports news and highlights shows that we studied, are just like him: they are men. And these men offer up a steady stream of verbal reports and visual images that focus on men's sports and largely ignore women's sports.

## a wave of participation

Riding the cultural wave of feminism, and backed legally by Title IX (the 1972 statute intended to ensure sex equity in education), girls and women in the United States have enthusiastically increased their participation in sports over the past three decades. As a result, boys no longer totally dominate high school sports. In 1971, only 294,000 U.S.

high school girls played interscholastic sports, compared with 3.7 million boys. In 1989, the first year of our sports media study, high school boys still outnumbered girls in sports, 3.4 million to 1.8 million. By 2004, the participation gap had closed further, 4.0 million boys to 2.9 million girls. College sports echo this trend. In 1972, when Title IX was enacted, the average college or university had two women's athletics teams. By 2004, the number had risen to more than eight teams per NCAA school. From 2000 to 2004, U.S. universities added 631 new women's teams. Women's participation rates in the Olympic Games have risen dramatically over the past three decades, and women's professional sports have also expanded.

Sports are no longer a "male preserve," to which boys and men enjoy exclusive or privileged access. Although men's sports still receive more than their share of community and school resources, and many girls and women still have to fight for full and equal access, the past three decades have seen a historic change in the gender dynamics of sports. But you would never know this if you got all your sports information from the network affiliates' evening and late-night news shows, or from the sports highlights shows on ESPN and Fox Sports. The media's continued marginalization of women's sports maintains the myth that sports are exclusively by, about, and for men. Women's sports are booming as never before. But if it is not in the news, it is, in a sense, simply "not happening."

## a trickle of coverage

We analyzed 15 years of televised sports news and highlights shows to see how they cover women's and men's sports. In 1989, 1993, 1999, and again in 2004, we sampled two weeks in March, two weeks in July, and two weeks in November to study both the quantity and quality of news coverage of women's and men's sports by the three Los Angeles network affiliates. In 1999, we added ESPN's popu-

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lar highlights show, *SportsCenter*, to our study. And in 2004, we added a regional highlights show, Fox Sports's *Southern California Sports Report*.

TV news and highlights shows cover men's college basketball and football, professional basketball and football, and professional baseball, peppered with generous doses of men's ice hockey, auto racing, golf, tennis, boxing, and occasional reports on other sports. Together, these reports make up a continuous stream of information, images, and commentary on male athletes and men's sports. Women's sports reports, by contrast, are occasional, and seem to interrupt the steady flow of reporting on men's sports.

Amazingly, in these 15 years, we found almost no increase in the coverage of women's sports. In our 1989 study, the three network affiliates devoted only 5 percent of their air time to women's sports. Ten years later, in 1999, there was a grudging increase to almost 9 percent. But in 2004, the proportion of coverage dropped back to 6 percent. The two sports highlights shows are even worse, with ESPN's *SportsCenter* devoting only 2 percent of its air time to women's sports, and Fox Sports's *Southern California Sports Report* only 3 percent. In a full 30 or 60 minutes devoted to sports, there is still almost no time for women.

Reports on women's sports are not only less frequent, but less varied. When women's sports stories did appear in our sample, 42 percent of them were about tennis. Track and field stories were a distant second, accounting for 16 percent of all women's sports stories.

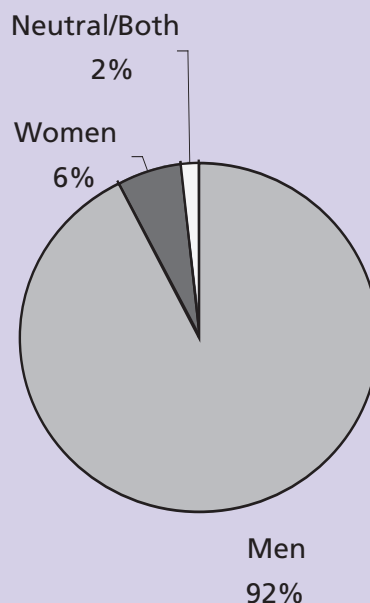
### gags and sex appeal

On those rare occasions when women do appear on sports news and highlights shows, how are they portrayed? They are often part of gag features or stories on marginal but entertaining pseudosports, such as a women's nude bungee jump in 1999. Sports news and highlights shows are often peppered with humor in order to make the reports more entertaining. For instance, in a March report that included no coverage of women's sports, during a report on the Dodgers' spring training camp, KABC showed a few sec-

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*Michael A. Messner, professor of sociology and gender studies at the University of Southern California, is author of Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports. Margaret Carlisle Duncan, professor of human movement sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is currently doing research on the meanings of obesity. Nicole Willms, a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern California, is conducting research on gender relations in the families of college athletes. Research for this article was funded by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.*

2004 network sports news coverage, by sex



onds of video about a middle-aged woman who had been invited to take batting practice at the camp. Ron Fukuzaki jokingly said to the news anchors, "Now we know the Dodgers are looking for a high-priced hitter, the way these ladies are hittin' the ball, hey, who knows, Marc and Michelle?" *SportsCenter* ran a 13-second story on a "weightlifting granny." Commenting on visuals of a woman lifting weights, Steve Berthiaume quipped, "We've been waiting forever for a sequel to the governor of California's hit, 'Pumping Iron.' We have it: here she is, the star of the show, the weight-lifting grandmama. Granny, you made us proud." We did not learn the woman's name or the location of the weight-lifting event. This was the only coverage of a "women's sport" during this broadcast of *SportsCenter*.

Women also appear in sexualized stories. Commentators seem endlessly amused by stories that combine gag features with opportunities for sexual titillation. One news show, having run no coverage of conventional women's sports, reported on a promotional "football game" in which the female players competed in lingerie. Such shows commonly devote much of their scanty coverage of women's sports to individual athletes presented as icons of white, heterosexual, feminine attractiveness. In 1999 it was Anna Kournikova; in 2004, Maria Sharapova.

Several times that year, WTA stories focused on Sharapova (only coverage of Serena Williams came close to the amount devoted to Sharapova). This focus on Sharapova was legitimate: she had recently won Wimbledon and had become a highly ranked player. But commentators rarely

seemed to report on Sharapova without also commenting (often jokingly) on her appearance. On November 11, 2004, KABC's Rob Fukuzaki introduced the day's only women's sports story—a 56-second feature on the WTA—with this teaser: "They slapped her on a billboard that read 'The closer you get, the hotter it gets.' Seventeen-year-old Maria Sharapova may have the same appeal as Anna Kournikova, but the young Russian can actually play tennis. Sharapova is a poster girl for the event." On one occasion, the Fox commentators were considerably less subtle. During their July 12 broadcast of a 33-second story on Sharapova, accompanied by footage of her win at Wimbledon, Barry LeBrock paused during his commentary as Van Earl Wright peppered the report with lusty howls: "In tennis news tonight ... seventeen-year-old Wimbledon champ Maria Sharapova—[HOWL]—who has withdrawn from the tournament citing need for rest and recuperation—[HOWL]—now you know why—the Chase Open was to have been Sharapova's first tournament since beating Serena Williams in the Wimbledon final. Sharapova did add though that she plans to rejoin the tour on July 26—[both commentators together HOWL]."

Scantly clad women sometimes provide a visual backdrop for the reporting of men's sports. For instance, we noted the recurring use of shots of female cheerleaders during reports on various men's sports. On March 20, KNBC's report on NCAA men's basketball included a 2- or 3-second shot of Alabama's female cheerleaders shaking their pom-poms. Such shots were common in the visual imagery during March reports on men's college basketball on all three network affiliates, ESPN, and Fox. In fact, Fox Sports promoted its own programs using various shots of college cheerleaders (often wearing local USC and UCLA outfits) doing bump and grind dances, wearing short skirts, with exposed midribs in tight-fitting cropped tops, accompanied by a voice-over saying, "The only sports network where Southern California fans come first. You're watching Fox Sports Network." Sexy female cheerleaders represent Fox Sports as a network, while female athletes are largely absent from its coverage.

### the men's club

Sport may no longer be the exclusive preserve of men, but it still appears to be so in the realm of televised sports highlights shows. ESPN's *SportsCenter* and Fox's *Southern California Sports Report* offer an almost seamless vision of sport as an exclusive territory set up by and for men.

*SportsCenter's* ironic, often snidely humorous style has set the tone for other highlight shows like Fox Sports's *Southern California Sports Report*. This relatively new genre

of televised sports entertainment meshes neatly with broader trends in contemporary popular culture that aim to entertain (and sell products to) young-to-middle-aged men. Television shows like *The Man Show*, magazines like *Maxim* and *FHM*, radio talkshows like the nationally syndicated *Tom Leykus Show*, and many radio and television sports talkshows share similar themes and target similar audiences of young men. These media typically present sports as a realm apart from women, where men can connect with each other "as men." This genre depicts and encourages a young, male lifestyle saturated with images of, and explicit talk about,



photo by AP

sexy women as objects of consumption. Consumer products, including—often centrally, as in *The Man Show*—beer, create bonds among young men.

Strong, competent, decisive women (like most female athletes) have no place in this cultural field. Such women are either ignored or disparaged. *SportsCenter* and Fox Sports's *Southern California Report* are "male spaces" (despite the occasional appearance of a female announcer). For the most part, they refrain from talking about or showing the athletic accomplishments of real female athletes. Women appear on these shows primarily as jokes, as sexual objects that prop up the men (Fox uses dancing cheerleaders in its ads), or as athletes, like Sharapova, who fit conventional stereotypes of heterosexual femininity.

### mini-spikes

Sociologists often tell students in their introductory classes to walk into an elevator and face the other people, rather than the door. The resulting awkwardness signals the breaching of a social rule. Social conventions like facing the door in the elevator are often so well-ingrained that they are invisible to everyone until someone doesn't conform. The

irregularity, the moment of resistance, or the deviant act tends to illustrate the rule. So too with moments in the mass media that contradict the dominant patterns.

More than half the news shows in our 2004 study had no coverage of women's sports. But we did notice two small surges in such coverage that, like facing the wrong way in an elevator, illuminate the larger patterns of (non)coverage of women's sports. The first mini-spike occurred on KNBC during July; the second (less dramatic) occurred during the November sample of the *Southern California Sports Report*.

In July of that year, KNBC devoted 15 percent of its sports news time to women's sports, far more than in the March sample (6 percent) or in the November sample (5 percent). In July, KNBC also devoted 21 percent of its ticker (the scrolling text at the bottom of the television screen) to women's sports. This was far more than the 5 percent and 2 percent of ticker time in March and November. Three times in July, the station led off a broadcast with a women's sports story. Twenty of KNBC's 36 women's sports stories in July focused on U.S. women's sports in the Olympics, and all three of the leads were on the Olympics. Neither of the other two network affiliate news shows, or the sports highlights shows in our sample, expanded its coverage of women's sports during the Olympics (KCBS had two women's Olympics stories during the March sample, KABC had six, ESPN three, and Fox three). How can we make sense of this single surge in coverage of women's Olympics sports? KNBC's expanded coverage of the Olympics on its news reports corresponded with the live and taped coverage of the Olympics by its parent network, NBC.

In the other surge, Fox devoted 7 percent of its *Southern California Sports Report* coverage to women's sports in November (compared to 1 percent in March and July). Five of Fox's six women's sports stories during the November sample were on tennis. This expanded coverage of women's tennis corresponded with a series of ads that Fox ran during the program, promoting a local WTA tournament, played at the Los Angeles Staples Center.

When asked why they don't cover more women's sports, producers, editors, and sports reporters often say they would like to, but they are just "giving the audience what they want." The two mini-spikes suggest a more complicated story. Though our content analysis cannot show how producers decide what to show, we suspect that it was no coincidence that KNBC's March surge in the coverage of women's Olympic sports coincided with the parent NBC network's live and taped coverage of the Olympics. Similarly,

Fox's small burst of coverage of women's tennis in November corresponded with the network's advertisements for a local WTA event.

KNBC's July surge in covering women's Olympic sports is especially noteworthy. When compared with other broadcasters, KNBC's surge in Olympics stories throws into relief the more general claim by producers that they choose their programming in response to audience demand for men's sports. Sometimes, it seems, when they perceive it to be in their interests, producers give us not what they think we want, but what they want us to want. The producers' party line asserts that the daily stream of stories and images of men's sports is simply a rational response to audience demand. This assertion obscures a more complicated reality: producers actively and consciously attempt to build audience demand for events in which they have a vested interest.

Audience-building, grounded in interlocking interests among television networks, news and highlight shows, commercial sponsors, and athletic organizations, is routine for men's sports. It appears to occur for women's sports only

when a show's producers see a direct link between their interests and the promotion of a particular women's sporting event. The interlocking interests in women's sports appear to be simple and linear: when there is a direct interest in promoting a particular women's sports event (as KNBC did with the

Olympics, and Fox did with the WTA), we see a surge in news or highlights coverage of that event. But this surge is both temporary and local (confined to the particular network with the direct interest in promoting the women's event).

By contrast, the interlocking interests in the men's sports/media/commercial complex permeate the mass media in a seemingly organic, multinodal manner. These promotional efforts are more easily taken for granted and, ironically, may be less visible as promotion. News and highlights shows are two important links in the overall apparatus of audience-building for men's sports, but they rarely operate this way for women's sports. Like the student who faces the wrong direction in the elevator, the "mini-spikes" are exceptional moments of local or temporary promotion of women's sports events that serve to illustrate the rule.

### what is to be done?

How can this "rule" be broken or changed? Clearly, our studies show that "evolutionary" growth in media coverage

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of women's sports does not simply happen automatically. Coverage of women's sports has remained the same for the past 15 years, and there is no reason to believe that this will change in the next 15 years unless producers decide that changing it serves their interests. Of course, producers want us to believe that they will give us more women's sports when we ask for them. For instance, on November 19, 2004, KNBC's Fred Roggin ended a broadcast of stories entirely about men with an 18-second report on women's golf that included game footage with this commentary: "And finally: got a call from a viewer last hour, [asking] why don't we show women's golf very often? Well, your wish is our command. Annika Sorenstam, the leader after two rounds of the ABT Championships. The Swedish superstar, who was seeking her eighth win of the year, fired a four-under 68 to grab a three-shot lead heading into the weekend. You call, we listen: there you go!"

Though viewers should phone television stations to protest sexism and ask for more equitable coverage of women's sports, a few phone calls from viewers will not produce a shift toward fair and equitable coverage; this will require pressures from several directions. One source of change would involve the development and support of more female sports reporters and commentators. Sports organizations too can contribute by giving the sports media more and better information about female athletes. Indeed, a 2005 longitudinal study by Mary Jo Kane and Jo Ann Buysse shows that in recent years, university sports information departments have vastly improved the presentation of women's sports in their annual media guides.

But a dramatic change will require a critical examination of the ways that sports organizations and media cling to traditional masculine assumptions. Sport is one of the last bastions of men's traditional power and privilege. The women who have stormed the playing fields by the millions have contested this patriarchal institution. But televised sports continues to juxtapose images of powerful male bodies with sexualized images of women's bodies in ways that affirm conventional notions of male superiority and female frailty. Sport is not a separate "world." It is intertwined with other

aspects of social life in important ways. For the gender imagery of sports media to reflect and support this revolution in female athleticism, power relations and perceptions of gender must continue to change within sport organizations, among commercial sponsors who promote and advertise sports, within schools and universities, and within the mass media. This kind of social change may require a renewed feminist movement, both inside and outside sport.

## recommended resources

Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles. "Gender in Televised Sports News and Highlights Shows: 1989 through 2004." (Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, 2005; [http://www.aafla.org/11pub/over\\_frmst.htm](http://www.aafla.org/11pub/over_frmst.htm)). The most recent addition to a longitudinal study that compares the quantity and quality of televised coverage of women's and men's sports.

Linda Jean Carpenter and Vivien R. Acosta. *Title IX* (Human Kinetics Publishers, 2005). A vivid history of the role of Title IX in U.S. women's sports, written by two scholars who have studied and advocated for gender equity in sports for several decades.

Michael A. Messner and Jeffrey Montez de Oca. "The Male Consumer as Loser: Beer and Liquor Ads in Mega Sports Media Events." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30 (2005):1879–1909. An examination of gender symbolism in beer and liquor ads aimed at boys and men in *Sports Illustrated* and in televised coverage of the Super Bowl.

David Nylund. "When in Rome: Heterosexism, Homophobia and Sports Talk Radio." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 28 (2004):136–68. A revealing study of one of the most popular sports radio talk shows.

Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff, eds. *Gender and Sport: A Reader* (Routledge, 2002). A collection of many of the most important scholarly articles on gender and sport.

There are more Ethiopian doctors practicing in Chicago than in Ethiopia.