

# Women Play Sport, But Not on TV: A Longitudinal Study of Televised News Media

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## Abstract

One of the long-standing trends in research on gender in sports media is the lack of coverage of women's sport and the lack of respectful, serious coverage of women's sport. In this article, we critically interrogate the assumption that the media simply provide fans with what they "want to see" (i.e., men's sports). Using quantitative and qualitative analysis, we examine 6 weeks of the televised news media coverage on the local news affiliates in Los Angeles (KABC, KNBC, and KCBS) and on a nationally broadcast sports news and highlight show, ESPN's *SportsCenter*. Part of an ongoing longitudinal study, the findings demonstrate that the coverage of women's sport is the lowest ever. We argue that the amount of coverage of women's sports and the quality of that coverage illustrates the ways in which the news media build audiences for men's sport while silencing and marginalizing women's sport. Moreover, the overall lack of coverage of women's sport, despite the tremendous increased participation of girls and women in sport at the high school, collegiate, and professional level, conveys a message to audiences that sport continues to be by, for, and about men.

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## Introduction

On July 13, 2009, the 6 p.m. sports segment included a rare moment for viewers who tuned in to watch the local news in the Los Angeles metropolitan area that evening—KABC included coverage women's sports in their broadcast. In discussing the removal of the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) commissioner by the league's players, sports news anchor Curt Sandoval commented,

And finally, a major revolt today for the women's pro golf tour. Some of the tour's top players forced Commissioner Caroline Bivins out. So, Marcia Evans is the temporary replacement. Former star Annika Sorenstam has been brought in as an advisor. The economy has had a devastating impact on the LPGA tour. Seven tournaments have folded in the last two years. This is sad because this happens the day after a *sensational* finish to the women's U. S. Open on the LPGA tour yesterday. It's a great game of golf they play. It's just that the golf fans want to see the big hitters like Tiger, so we wish them well to get that resolved.

We agree with Sandoval that it is indeed a great game of golf in the women's tournaments. However, KABC spent less than 30 s of their previous day's sports segment covering the "sensational finish." While women's golf received 19.7% of the overall coverage of women sports on the local networks in our sample, it represented only 0.3% of the total coverage of all sports. In this article, we critically interrogate the assumption embedded in KABC's news coverage of women's golf, and women's sport more generally: The media simply provide coverage of what fans "want to see" (i.e., men's sports). While a common sense assumption is that the lack of news media coverage is primarily the result of audience demand, in this article, we argue that the amount of coverage and the quality of coverage contributes to a particular reception of sports, one that builds and sustains audience interest and thus "demand" for men's sports, while constraining audience interest for women's sports.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, other sports media scholars have argued that sports media coverage involves more than just the "action of athletes" (Greer, Hardin, & Homan, 2009, p. 173); the commentary and production values construct the viewing experience. Studying not only the amount of coverage but also the qualitative aspects of the coverage, including production values and commentary, illustrates how "sport is constructed as entertaining" (Greer et al., 2009, p. 174). The ways sports events are produced, and in the case of this study, whether and how sports events are covered by the news media, can either reproduce or challenge the hegemonic ideology that women's sports are less exciting (Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999, as cited in Greer et al., 2009). Thus, the news media play an important role in shaping audience interest for sports.

Using quantitative and qualitative analysis, we examine the televised news media coverage on the local news affiliates in Los Angeles (KABC, KNBC, and KCBS) and on a nationally broadcast sports news and highlight show, ESPN's *SportsCenter* to assess changes and continuities in the amount of coverage and the quality of coverage of men's and women's sports. We argue that both the amount of coverage of women's sports and the quality of that coverage illustrate the ways in which televised news media build audiences for men's sport while silencing and marginalizing women's sport. Moreover, the overall lack of coverage of women's sport, despite the tremendous increased participation of girls and women in sport at the high school, collegiate, and professional levels, conveys the message to audiences that sport continues to be by, for, and about men.

## Review of Literature

One of the long-standing trends in research on gender in sports media is the lack of coverage of women's sport and the lack of respectful, serious coverage of women's sport. This trend emerges in a variety of media platforms including print and televised news media (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Bishop, 2003; Cooky, Wachs, Messner, & Dworkin, 2010; Duncan, Messner, & Willms, 2005; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Kian, Vincent, & Modello, 2008; Lumpkin, 2009; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003; Pratt, Grappendorf, Grundvig, & LeBlanc, 2008; Tuggle, 1997). Despite the increased participation of girls and women in sport as a result of Title IX, the increase of professional leagues for women, and the growing popularity of women's sport among sports fans, there are consistent patterns related to the lack of news media coverage of women's sport that persist over time. As longitudinal research on the televised news media coverage demonstrates, women's sport is consistently ignored and sport media silences women's sports (Duncan et al., 2005; Messner et al., 2003; Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). Since 1989, every 5 years, Messner and his colleagues examine local and national televised news media coverage of men's and women's sport, focusing on the amount of coverage, media production values, and how men's and women's sports are covered. The results of these studies demonstrate that between 1989 and 1999 there was a slight increase in women's sports coverage. After 1999, the amount of coverage declined. In our previous research (Messner et al., 2003), we cautioned that the increase in coverage from approximately 5% in 1989 to almost 9% in 1999 did not indicate improvements in the coverage of women's sport. Rather, we noted that there were long sports segments (over 2 min), wherein women were sexually objectified or were the targets of humorous sexualization. These segments trivialized female athletes and women's sports. We argued this, along with an overall silencing of women's sports, contributed to the devaluation of women's sports on televised news media.

In a similar study, Tuggle and his colleagues (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Tuggle, 1997) examined the coverage of a sample of sportscasts on ESPN's *SportsCenter*. A 4-week period from the end of August to the end of September 1995 was

examined. The study was replicated again, examining content in May and June 2002, when two professional women's leagues were in season. While the researchers hypothesized that the amount of coverage of women's sports would be higher in the 2002 sample than in the 1995 sample, given the advent of several women's professional leagues, the coverage of women's sports had actually declined.

Longitudinal studies examining print media content illustrate similar trends. In a study that examined *Sports Illustrated* magazine feature articles from 1990 to 1999, Lumpkin (2009) found that 89.9% of feature articles were of male athletes or men's sports while only 9.7% were on female athletes or women's sports. Moreover, the feature articles highlighted the femininity of female athletes and at times included sexist language (Lumpkin, 2009).

Researchers have also examined the news media coverage of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's and women's basketball tournaments. This sports event provides researchers with the ability to compare a major sport event that occurs within overlapping time frame, allowing for more comparable comparisons. Kian, Vincent, and Modello (2008) examined print media coverage of the 2006 Division I tournaments in *USA Today* and the *New York Times* and online media coverage in ESPN.com and CBS *Sportsline*. This particular study was important, given it was among the first to examine the content in online forums. The researchers found that approximately 76% of the articles were on the men's tournament and only 23% were on the women's tournament. Moreover, when examining the narratives, the researchers found that female athletes were portrayed as "Others," frequently compared with men and men's sports, which the researchers note, sends audiences the message that sport is still a male domain, even when articles focused on the women's tournament.

Female athletes are "othered" in distinct ways in news media coverage. As research consistently finds, in the rare moments when women's sport is included inside mainstream news media frames, the coverage trivializes women's athleticism or reproduces narrow, stereotypical representations of female athleticism that draw on sexist and/or ideologies. For example, sport studies scholars have written extensively on how racism and sexism inform the ways in which Serena and Venus Williams have been covered in mainstream news media (Douglas, 2005; Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; McKay & Johnson, 2008; Schultz, 2005). Sports coverage of women's sports often centers on controversial events, while coverage of competitive events remains scarce. For example, in their examination of the mainstream print news media frames of the 2006–2007 Rutgers University women's basketball team and the controversy following radio personality, Don Imus' reference to the team as "nappy-headed ho's," the researchers noted that the coverage of the controversy alone garnered 2–3 times the amount of coverage as the entire 2007 NCAA women's tournament (Cooky et al., 2010).

Although recent research demonstrates a shift toward more respectful representation of women's sports in some media outlets (Kane & Buysse, 2005; McKay & Dalliere, 2009), this is typically found in smaller media markets or in niche markets

where the focus centers on women's sports. Messner (2002) argued that while women's sports are no longer "symbolically annihilated" in media, the relegation of coverage of women's sports to these specialty markets allows the institutional center of sport to remain intact, resilient to any challenges women's presence may pose to the gender order of sport.

The media's differential coverage of men and women's sports continues to serve as an institutional and cultural site for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Greer et al., 2009; Kian et al., 2008; Vincent, 2004). This should not be surprising since studies of sport consistently note that sport is one of the most significant social institutions where hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and reaffirmed (Messner, 2002; Nylund, 2007). There are many reasons for this, including the sociohistorical development of sport in North America (Burstyn, 1999; Cahn, 1994; Messner, 1995) and the ways in which socially constructed gender differences are "naturalized" in sport contexts (Birrell & Cole, 1994; Kane, 1995; Travers, 2008).

Furthermore, sports media scholars have argued that the above trends regarding the lack of coverage are, in part, due to the overrepresentation of men in sport newsrooms. According to Lapchick's (2008)<sup>2</sup> Racial and Gender Report Card of "Associated Press Sports Editors," the majority of those who are in positions to write about, frame, and edit the coverage of sports are men. According to the study, 94% of sports editors, 89% of assistant sports editors, 88% of columnists, 87% of sport reporters, and 89% of copy editors/designers in the United States are male, and of those same positions the majority are White. Elsewhere, Lapchick (2006) argues that the ideological worldview of the mostly White, mostly male reporters, editors, and columnists has an impact on which sports get covered and how sport and athletes are represented. Indeed, Kian and Hardin (2009) found that female sports writers were more likely to frame female athletes in terms of their athletic prowess. However, they also caution against the degree to which the presence of women in sports newsrooms may lead to significant shifts in coverage, given the constraints imposed by institutional structures.

## Method

Content analysis involves a systematic, quantitative analysis of content, usually texts, images, or other symbolic matter (Krippendorff, 2004). According to Payne and Payne (2004), "content analysis seeks to demonstrate the meaning of written or visual sources by systematically allocating their content to predetermined, detailed categories, and then both quantifying and interpreting the outcomes" (p. 51). As a methodology, content analysis allows researchers to determine the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words or concepts within the text. We used content analysis to systematically analyze the coverage of men's and women's sport in televised news media.

As with the 1989, 1993, 1999, and 2004 data studies, the central aim of the current study was to compare the quantity and quality of televised news and highlights

shows' coverage of women's and men's athletic events. Several research questions informed the study: In what ways do televised sports news media cover men's and women's sports events? What is the amount of coverage given to men's sports? What is the amount of coverage given to women's sports? Do the production values of men's sports differ from that of women's sports? If so, how? What is the quality of commentary of men's sports? What is the quality of commentary of women's sports? Are women's sports covered in ways that highlight athletic competence or in ways that trivialize women's sport? Does the coverage focus on the competitive aspects of women's sport, including games/matches, game highlights, scores and statistics, outcomes and significance? Does the coverage sexualize, trivialize, or portray women as objects of sexualized humor? Has the coverage of women's sports in this data sample changed or remained the same since prior data collection years? In other words, what are the continuities or discontinuities in the coverage over the past 20 years?

In order to examine change and continuity over time, we replicated previous iterations of the study. Thus, the design and methods of data collection and data analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) were identical to those of the 1989, 1993, 1999, and 2004 studies. In Stage 1 of the research, we recorded all of the 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. sports news and highlights segments on the local Los Angeles affiliates of CBS, NBC, and ABC and the 11 p.m. broadcast of ESPN's *SportsCenter*. In Stage 2, the research assistant (third author) received training on coding data. This was the same training previous research assistants received in prior iterations of the study so as to ensure continuity in the analysis across time. The third author viewed all recordings and independently coded the data.<sup>3</sup> In Stage 3, the first author independently viewed all recordings and qualitatively analyzed the commentary. In other words, using the quantitative codes, segments were identified wherein female athletes/women's sports were discussed, were analyzed for commentary, and how female athletes/women's sports were portrayed. Segments that featured nonserious discussions of men's and women's sports, sports controversies in men's and women's sports, or other segments that focused on stories outside the competitive context were also qualitatively analyzed. In Stage 4, the first author ran descriptive statistics on the coded data. Both the first and second author compiled an interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative results.

Over the past decade, television news and highlights shows have introduced visual techniques (e.g., split screens and scrolling tickers) to convey information in ways that invite viewers to listen, view images, and read text that refer simultaneously to two or more stories. As in 2004, most of the 2009 sports news and highlights programs in our sample included a continual running "ticker" at the bottom of the television screen. The ticker uses written text to report game scores, headlines, and breaking sports news that may or may not be reported through the main conventional verbal reporting and visual images. As with previous iterations, for the 2009 data, we also analyzed the quantity of ticker coverage devoted to women's and to men's sports.

We analyzed 6 weeks of television sports news, both the 6 p.m. segments and the 11 p.m. segments, on the three local network affiliates in Los Angeles (KNBC, KCBS,

and KABC). As in the 1989, 1993, 1999, and 2004 studies, in order to ensure the sample included various sports seasons, we analyzed three, 2-week blocks: March 15–28; July 12–25; and November 8–21. The codebook drew upon previous iterations of the study and included gender of sport (male, female, neutral), type of sport (basketball, football, golf, tennis, etc.), competitive level of the sport (professional, college, high school, youth, recreation, etc), and time of the segment (measured from the beginning of an individual segment of coverage, reported in total minutes/seconds; segments were defined based on the type of sport covered). Codes were also included to quantify production values (coded as yes/no) including the use of music, the use of graphics, interviews, and the inclusion game highlights. We analyzed the main coverage of the broadcast, as well as the scrolling ticker at the bottom of the screen (in cases where it was present). In addition to the above quantitative measures, we analyzed the quality of coverage in terms of visuals and verbal commentary.

In addition to the local affiliates, we analyzed 3 weeks<sup>4</sup> of the 1-hr 11 p.m. ESPN *SportsCenter* broadcasts. These 3 weeks corresponded with the first week of each of the three network news segments: March 15–21, July 12–18, and November 8–14. As mentioned above, we added *SportsCenter* to the study in 1999, which allows us the ability to compare the 2009 data with the 1999 and 2004 data. The same procedures used for the analysis of the local affiliates were followed for the analysis of *SportsCenter*.

## Results

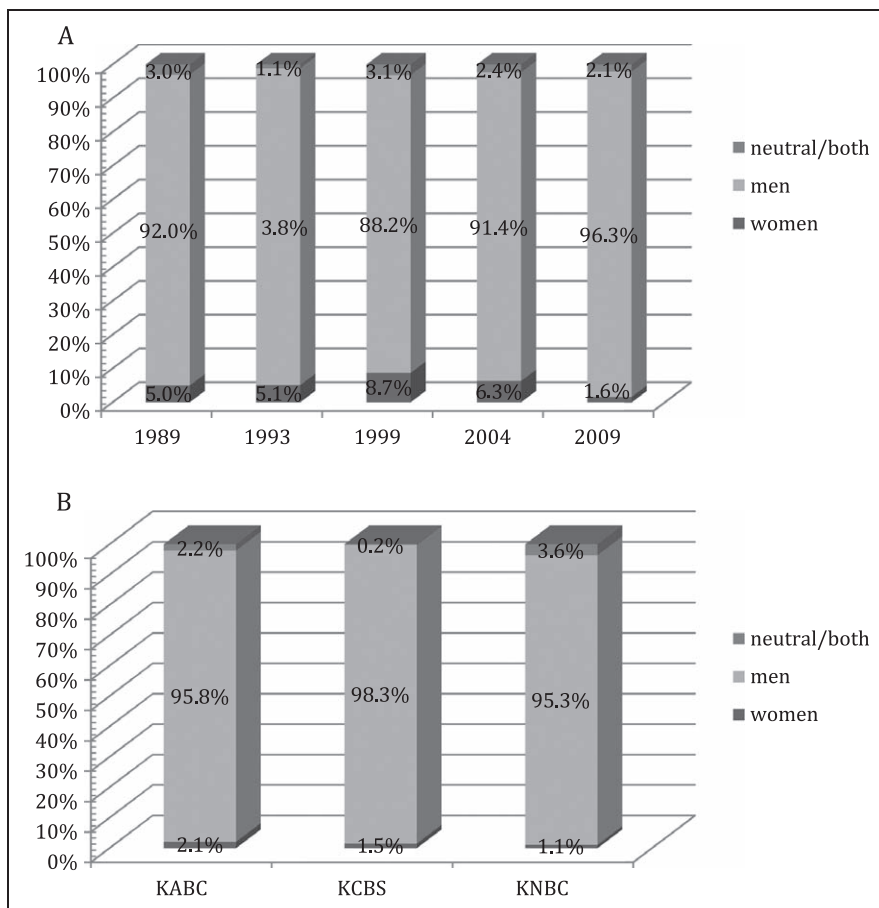
### Coverage of Women's Sports Plummet

In the 1989 and 1994 studies, we noted that female athletes rarely received coverage on the televised sports news. The 1999 study revealed an encouraging increase in the proportion of sports news devoted to coverage of women's sports, followed by a small decline in 2004 study. As Figure 1A illustrates, the 2009 proportion of airtime devoted to women's sports dropped precipitously to 1.6%, by far its lowest level in any year measured over the past two decades.

In past studies, the three network affiliates demonstrated similar patterns of coverage, all devoting a disproportionate amount of time to men's sports (Messner, Duncan, & Willms, 2006; Messner et al., 1996, 2003). These similarities continued with the 2009 study; however as Figure 1B shows, there were also several differences. KNBC, which in the 2004 study showed the highest proportion of coverage of women's sports (8.9%), dropped off to 1.1% coverage of women's sports in the 2009 study. KABC and KCBS both hovered closer to the 2% level, also representing a decline in coverage of women's sports from previous studies.

As in past studies, there was little or no difference between the 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. editions of the three local affiliate news shows, in terms of coverage of women's sports. Also consistent with past studies, the November period of the sample contained the least amount of coverage of women's sports (almost none). There was marginally more coverage of women's sports during the March and July periods.





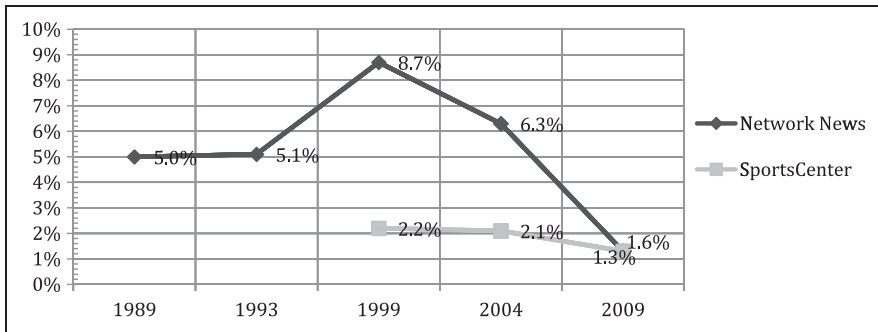
**Figure 1.** A. Network news by gender, 1989–2009. B. Network affiliates' main coverage by gender, 2009.

In 1999 (when we added *SportsCenter* to the study) and again in 2004, the proportion of the popular highlights show's coverage devoted to women's sports was significantly lower than proportions devoted by local affiliate news shows. As Figure 2 illustrates, *SportsCenter's* coverage of women's sports declined in 2009 to 1.3%, just slightly lower than the combined coverage of the three local affiliates.

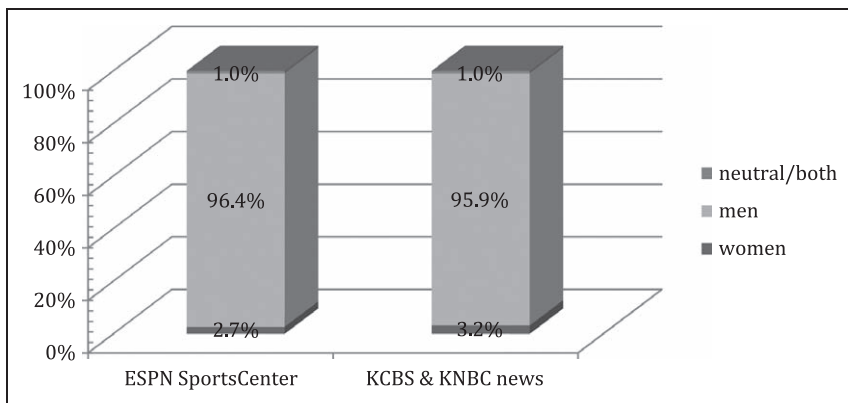
### Women's Sports on the Margins

ESPN's *SportsCenter* and two of the local affiliate news shows (KNBC and KCBS) continually ran a scrolling ticker text bar at the bottom of the screen, reporting scores and other sports news. The proportion of "ticker time" devoted to women's sports





**Figure 2.** News and SportsCenter airtime devoted to women’s sports, 1989–2009.



**Figure 3.** Ticker time by gender, 2009.

on KNBC and KCBS was 3.2%, double the proportion of the thin airtime they devoted to women’s sports in their main broadcasts. In 2009, *SportsCenter* devoted 2.7% of its ticker time to women’s sports (Figure 3). While this is double the 1.3% main coverage that *SportsCenter* devoted to women’s sports, it represents a decline from 2004, when the highlights show devoted 8.5% of its ticker time to women’s sports.

### Men’s “Big Three” Sports Are the Central Focus

Every sports news or highlights broadcast begins with a lead story that sets the tone of the broadcast. Lead stories, especially those on *SportsCenter*, also tend to be the longest stories of the broadcast, containing the highest production values (often including multiple interviews, game footage, musical montage, graphic statistics, etc.). In our sample, 100% of the *SportsCenter* programs and 100% of the local

**Table 1.** Sports Covered in Combined (Main Plus Ticker) Coverage on TV News and *SportsCenter*, 2009.

Gender/Sport	Percentage
Men's football	21
Men's basketball	23
Men's baseball	24
Men's golf	7
All other men's sports	20
Women's basketball	2
All other women's sports	1
Neutral/both	2
Total sports coverage (main and ticker)	100

affiliates sports programs had men's sports as the lead story. There were a number of significant stories in women's sports that were ignored by the local affiliates and ESPN. For example, in 2009, the University of Connecticut women's basketball team went undefeated, and featured a star-studded lineup, including first overall draft pick in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), Maya Moore. Similar stories in men's sports capture the attention of sports news media and are featured in visually exciting ways. This was not the case for U Conn's winning team. There were other major events in women's sports that would have warranted media coverage<sup>5</sup> including the WNBA All Star tournament, the World Figure Skating Championships, World Cup Softball Tournament, and the U.S. Open LPGA Tour.

As Table 1 illustrates, both ESPN's *SportsCenter* and the network affiliates' news shows devoted the vast majority of their attention to three men's sports. When combining all main coverage and ticker time, the three men's sports of football, basketball, and baseball received a combined 68% of all coverage. Men's golf was a distant fourth, receiving 6.5% of the coverage. Nineteen other men's sports shared 20% of the total coverage. Meanwhile, basketball was the only women's sport to receive anything close to substantial attention, garnering 1.5% of the overall coverage. Four other women's sports (golf, soccer, tennis, and softball) shared less than 1% of the total combined coverage. In previous iterations of the study, tennis was usually the most commonly covered women's sport (43% of all women's sports stories in the 2004 study were tennis stories). This was not the case in 2009.

While one could argue that women's sports receive less attention given that there were fewer major women's events or professional leagues competing during our sample time frame, reporters continually delivered stories on men's sports that were out of season, including stories on professional (and occasionally college) football in March and July, pro baseball in November, and pro basketball in July, as Table 2 shows.

Coverage of the "Big Three" men's sports, even when these sports were out of season (in other words, teams were not participating in competitive events), far

**Table 2.** Coverage of “Big Three” Men’s Sports While Out of Season (Number of Stories; Minutes: Seconds).

	KABC, KNBC, and KCBS	ESPN <i>SportsCenter</i>
November men’s baseball stories	32 Stories 17:01	8 Stories 5:52
March and July men’s football stories	26 Stories 14:11	42 Stories 46:18
July men’s basketball stories	60 Stories 35:31	21 Stories 14:44

exceeded the coverage of all women’s sports, whether those women’s sports were in season or out of season (see Tables 1 and 2).

However, overall comparisons of men’s and women’s sports could be seen as misleading—like comparing apples and oranges—since there are still some men’s sports (men’s pro football and baseball in particular) for which there are no fully developed women’s equivalents. Thus, it is instructive to compare a sport for which there are equivalent men’s and women’s teams and leagues. For this purpose, we compared the coverage of professional and collegiate women’s and men’s basketball.

Table 3 shows a comparison of coverage of the WNBA and coverage of the men’s National Basketball Association (NBA). Breaking down in-season and out-of-season coverage of the men’s and women’s professional leagues sheds light on the depth of the gender asymmetries in news and highlights shows.

**Table 3.** Coverage of WNBA and NBA, In Season and Out of Season (Number of Stories; Minutes: Seconds).

	March	July
WNBA on KABC, KNBC, and KCBS	(Out of season) 0 Stories; 0:00	(In season) 3 Stories; 2:51
WNBA on ESPN <i>SportsCenter</i>	(Out of season) 0 Stories; 0:00	(In season) 5 Stories 2:40
NBA on KABC, KNBC, and KCBS	(In season) 51 Stories; 43:35	(Out of season) 60 Stories; 35:31
NBA on ESPN <i>SportsCenter</i>	(In season) 21 Stories; 22:26	(Out of season) 21 Stories; 14:44

Note. WNBA = Women’s National Basketball Association; NBA = National Basketball Association.

The WNBA received scant coverage in the main reports of both the network news and *SportsCenter* broadcasts—even when in season. But as Table 4 illustrates, the WNBA did receive significant in-season coverage in the rolling ticker, which appears at the bottom of the screen.

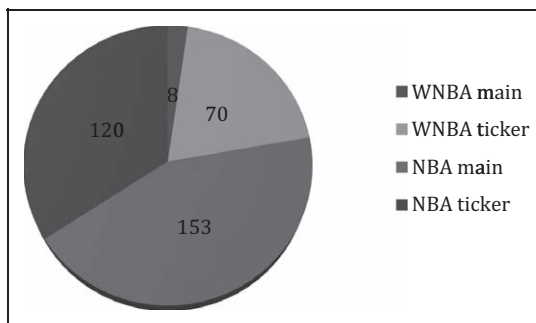
When in season (July), the vast majority (70 of the 78) of news segments featuring the WNBA that appeared during the sample were literally marginalized to the

**Table 4.** Ticker Coverage of NBA and WNBA, In Season and Out of Season (Number of Ticker Stories; Hours: Minutes: Seconds).

	March	July
WNBA on KABC, KNBC, and KCBS	(Out of season) 0 Stories; 0:00	(In season) 48 Stories; 11:01
WNBA on ESPN <i>SportsCenter</i>	(Out of season) 0 Stories; 0:00	(In season) 22 Stories 7:56
NBA on KABC, KNBC, and KCBS	(In season) 58 Stories; 30:12	(Out of season) 10 Stories; 3:58
NBA on ESPN <i>SportsCenter</i>	(In season) 28 Stories; 22:26	(Out of season) 24 Stories; 18:28

Note. WNBA = Women's National Basketball Association; NBA = National Basketball Association.

scrolling ticker. Only eight segments on the WNBA appeared in the main coverage of the broadcast. When out of season (March), WNBA coverage was entirely absent from the both the main reports and the ticker. Meanwhile, NBA stories continued to be given generous main story and ticker coverage, whether in season or out of season. Figure 4 compares the ticker and main coverage of WNBA and NBA, combining the total number of in-season and out-of-season segments on the news and highlights shows.



**Figure 4.** Number of professional basketball stories, combined news, and highlights shows.

### March Madness: Mainly for Men

Coverage of women's and men's college basketball during the month of March offers more of a stark contrast, since these competitive tournaments occur in overlapping time frames. As Table 5 illustrates, the local affiliates entirely ignored women's college basketball games, while ESPN's *SportsCenter* gave them token attention. Meanwhile, both the local affiliates and *SportsCenter* lavished major attention on men's college basketball.

**Table 5.** In-Season Coverage of Men's and Women's NCAA Basketball in March (Number of Stories; Hours: Minutes: Seconds).

	Men's NCAA Basketball	Women's NCAA Basketball
KABC, KNBC, and KCBS, main coverage	60 Stories 1:17:47	0 Stories 0:00
KABC, KNBC, and KCBS, ticker coverage	33 Stories 13:48	0 Stories 0:00
ESPN <i>SportsCenter</i> , main coverage	40 Stories 1:36:33	4 Stories 1:12
ESPN <i>SportsCenter</i> , ticker coverage	56 Stories 1:28:33	7 Stories 5:07

Note. NCAA = National Collegiate Athletic Association.

The comparison of women's and men's NCAA basketball reveals the highly asymmetrical coverage of the same women's and men's event during the same temporal frame. One could argue that coverage of the NCAA tournament on the local affiliates is influenced by whether or not "local" teams are successful in the brackets. Indeed, in 2009, both University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and University of Southern California (USC) men's teams went to the second round of the tournament, while neither school's women's teams received a bid (although several other California schools made the women's tournament including University of California, Berkeley, University of California, Santa Barbara, Fresno State, and Stanford). However, it is important to note that the local affiliates continued to cover the men's tournament even after UCLA and USC were defeated in the second round. It is also important to note that ESPN's market is national, not local (although some claim ESPN has an "East Coast" bias given its headquarters in Connecticut). This, along with the University of Connecticut women's team having an undefeated season,<sup>6</sup> should have lead to more balanced coverage of the women's tournament on *SportsCenter*. However, similar to the coverage of the WNBA, the women's NCAA basketball tournament received only 6 min total (main and ticker) coverage, compared to the nearly 3 hr total coverage devoted to the men's, and was mostly relegated to the margins, on the scrolling ticker at the bottom of the screen. Thus, the findings illustrate the conventional logic of sports coverage does not apply to women's sports, which was marginalized to the ticker on ESPN or ignored entirely on the local affiliates.

It is not that the generous coverage of the men's tournament left no time for covering the women's tournament. Rather, producers decided to cover other sports stories instead. On March 23, for instance, KNBC devoted generous coverage to the men's tournament and none to the women's tournament, yet spent 30 s covering a gag feature about a burger with 5,000 calories and 300 g of fat, which fans could purchase at a minor league baseball park in Michigan. And the next day, KNBC gave

women's sports a nod with a story that featured shots of tennis star Serena Williams wearing a short dress, climbing out of a sunroof of a car and onto its roof to "play" tennis against male player Andy Murray, who stood atop another car. This publicity stunt was intended to promote the start of the Ericsson Open tournament. Commentator Mario Solis quipped, "Tennis anyone? I hope nobody decides to use a drop shot!" This was the only mention of women's sports during this broadcast. In another example of where the news media chose gag features over serious coverage of women's sport was on March 24, 2009. During the heart of the women's tournament, KABC ran a 1-min, 31-s feature on the 70th anniversary of Little League Baseball, and during its 11 p.m. broadcast on the same day, a 29-s feature on 2½-year old "pool prodigy," Keith O'Dell.

### *Change and Continuity: Shifting Portrayals of Women*

In past studies, we pointed to commentators' common practice of the use of sarcastic humor in portraying women athletes (and sometimes women spectators) as objects of ridicule, as participants in laughable "gag sports" (e.g., a woman's nude bungee jump in 1999 and a "weightlifting granny" in 2004) and/or as sexual objects (Messner et al., 2003, 2006). In the 2004 sample, we noted a decline in disrespectful or insulting treatment of women, compared with previous years. In 2009, we saw even less of this sort of sexist treatment of women, though this may, in part, reflect that women in any form were absent from the broadcasts. We outline below four themes that emerged in the rare occasions when women were included inside the frame of the sports coverage. Those themes are (1) rare moments of respectful coverage of women; (2) sexualized gag stories; (3) fights, assaults, and scandals; and (4) women as wives, girlfriends, and mothers.

*Rare Moments of Respectful Coverage of Women.* In the 2009 sample, there were several instances where resources and time were devoted to delivering high-quality and respectful reports on a women's sporting event. For instance, on November 14, *SportsCenter* presented a 20-s long story highlighting an upcoming Baylor versus Tennessee women's college basketball game. The story was respectful in tone and included compelling game footage. While *SportsCenter's* coverage of women's sports during our March sample was negligible, the majority of that coverage was devoted to a series of features entitled, "Celebrating Women's History Month: Her Triumph, Her Story." The feature story was 30 s in length, which would run during the hour-long broadcast. Each feature focused on an individual woman athlete, such as Rachel Fico, one of "the nation's finest in high school softball," and college skier Kelly Brush, who had been paralyzed in an accident and participates in adaptive skiing. While the "Her Story" features had high technical quality and were delivered in a respectful tone, it should be noted that each "Her Story" feature was cordoned off from the programming of *SportsCenter* highlights, and instead was presented as something special and separate (the segments appeared at the end of a commercial

break, before the resumption of *SportsCenter's* regular sports highlights report, which contained little or no coverage of that day's women's sports events).

**Sexualized Gag Stories.** The news broadcasts included a small number of sexualized gag stories about women that seemed reminiscent to the qualitative trends we noted from our samples in the 1990s. For instance, on November 11, 2009, KNBC's Fred Roggin delivered a gag story on a new Japanese product:

How 'bout this: With the holiday season quickly approaching, here's a perfect stocking stuffer for that woman who loves to play golf. A Japanese designer has created a bra that unfolds into a putting green. The 'Make-The-Putt Bra' turns into a self-contained, five-foot long mat that comes complete with a tee and golf balls." [Viewers see footage of a Japanese woman wearing a short, pleated white skirt, modeling the bra, putting a golf ball into the hole within the breast cup portion of the bra.] "If that's not enough the bra also comes with a motivational tape that blares the traditional Japanese words of encouragement, 'Nice in!' Yes, it is truly a gift that keeps on giving.

The "Japanese Putting Bra" was a 24-s long story embedded in a broadcast consisting otherwise of stories on four men's pro sports (football, baseball, soccer, and ice hockey), and appeared in a month when KNBC had almost no coverage of women's sports.

Similar to trends from our earlier reports, on July 18, 2009, in a broadcast that focused entirely on men's sports, KABC's Kurt Sandoval closed with a 28-s long story on the Lakers' Girls Tryouts. In taped footage of the tryouts, viewers saw young dancing women wearing sports bra tops and bikini bottoms, as cameras, positioned below the participants, panned up from their legs to their abdomens, to their breasts, and finally to their faces, during which Sandoval reported:

Finally, with Trevor Ariza in Houston and Lamar Odom's contract off the table, Lakers fans needed something to smile about. We bring you . . . the Lakers Girl try-outs. Good to see life is actually well in El Segundo for Lakers fans today. Several dozens putting on their best show to try to win that coveted—highly coveted—spot on the Lakers Girl roster. Just ask Paula Abdul if it can help your career. We wish all the ladies well tonight." To which a female co-anchor responds, "You just made Danny's evening" (referring to KABC weatherman Danny Romero). Off-screen, laughter erupts, to which Sandoval responds, "We aim to please."

**Fights, Assaults, and Scandals.** Women's sports was deemed newsworthy when the news frame involved physical violence, egregious rule breaking, or economic problems within the sport itself. For instance, on November 11, 2009, KNBC's Fred Roggin devoted 39 s (of a broadcast of 2:40 that otherwise covered only men's sports) to a graphic discussion of alarm over soccer player Elizabeth Lambert's on-field hair-



pulling assault on another player. *SportsCenter* ran a clip of Lambert's hair-pulling incident as one of its November 8, 2009, "Ultimate Highlights Clips." And on November 9, KABC ran a short story on a fight that broke out in the stands at a high school girls' soccer game. On July 13, KABC's Kurt Sandoval reported that LPGA commissioner Caroline Bivens had been ousted as a result of "a major revolt on the women's tour." Noting the devastating impact that the declining economy has recently had on women's golf, Sandoval concluded that, "It's a great game of golf they play. It's just that the golf fans want to see the big hitters like Tiger, so we wish them well to get that resolved."

*Women as Girlfriends, Wives, and Mothers.* While women were rarely covered, women were often presented in conventional heterosexual roles, including as wives or girlfriends of prominent male athletes. On July 12, KABC's Curt Sandoval reported on autoracing star Dario Franchitti, showing a clip of him during a moment of victory, kissing his celebrity wife: "Another fabulous outing for Dario Franchitti. Like life's not good enough: He's married to Ashley Judd." A July 14 story on KABC focused on USC quarterback Matt Cassel's newly signed \$63 Million NFL contract. Commentator Rob Fukuzaki joked that it "definitely pays . . . dating a quarterback at USC," to which his male coanchor laughed and said, "I'm not touchin' that one!"

Commentators frequently foregrounded successful women athletes' status as wives or mothers, such as in a July 18 KABC story on beach volleyball Olympic champion Kerri Walsh-Jennings that mentioned her husband's volleyball win that day, and her own announcement that she is ready to return to play only 2 months after giving birth. Similarly, on July 12, *SportsCenter* delivered a short WNBA promotion for the next day's WNBA game to be broadcast on ESPN, saying " . . . the new mom Candace Parker leads the Los Angeles Sparks to Connecticut to take on the Sun."

*SportsCenter's* "Her Story" segment on March 20 featured Olympics track and field athlete Sanya Richards and was narrated by her fiancé, pro football player Aaron Ross. "Hello," Ross began, "My name is Aaron Ross, of the New York Giants. And I want to tell to you today about my fiancé, Sanya Richards." As viewers saw still photos of Richards competing, Ross's voice-over continued, "Her work ethic is second to none. I train with her and still to this day have not been able to make it through a workout." Viewers saw taped clips of Ross and Richards working out together, as Ross explained that the night before the finals in the Olympics in Beijing, Richards told him, "'I'm going to go out there and give it my all.' (Ross continues) And she sure did. She came home with a Gold." This story was notable because it delivered high-quality production and respectful commentary on a woman athlete, yet presented her firmly within the familiar frame of woman as partner to a high-profile male athlete.

### *Gender Convergence: "Negative" Depictions of Men*

Sprinkled throughout the 2009 study were a few stories that made fun of men athletes, sexualized them, or focused on their transgressions. For instance, on July 23, KNBC's Fred Roggin mocked soccer star David Beckham's declining athletic skills and his

ascending status as an international sex symbol: “David Beckham was—*was*—a great player. But now he’s the Anna Kournikova of soccer. Women love to look at him. And, let’s be honest, some men do as well. But with that said, there’s plenty of people out there that simply don’t like him now.” In addition, there were several stories in the month of July that appeared on all of the news shows, focused on NFL quarterback Ben Roethlisberger having been accused of raping a woman in Lake Tahoe. There was also the occasional stand-alone story, such as the one on a French male tennis player who had been banned for 2 years from the sport for having tested positive for cocaine. The main difference in how these negative or derogatory stories about men athletes were presented, as compared with those on women, was that they were embedded within a seemingly unending flow of respectful and celebratory stories about men’s sports and male athletes. By contrast, a negative or sexualized gag story on a woman athlete most often stood alone as the only women’s sports story in a particular broadcast, and in a context wherein women were rarely covered, if at all.

### *Commentators: Racially Diverse; Sex Segregated*

In past studies, we noted that the TV sports news announcers were all men, while *SportsCenter* included a few women announcers. In contrast to the sex segregation among sports commentators, previous studies revealed considerable racial diversity. This dual pattern of racial diversity and sex segregation continued in 2009. As Table 6 shows, only one female announcer appeared during our entire sample of KABC, KCBS, and KABC news broadcasts—and she was not an anchorperson, instead she appeared briefly as an ancillary reporter. Taken together, the three network affiliates appear to be very diverse racially; however, KNBC accounts for all 40 appearances of a Latino male announcer (Mario Solis), KABC accounts for all 46 appearances of an Asian Pacific male announcer (Rob Fukuzaki), and KCBS accounts for all appearances of a Black male announcer (Jim Hill).

Grouped together, the data on the three network affiliates indicate that sports news commentary in the Los Angeles TV market continues to be a racially diverse profession. Meanwhile, in contrast to other on-camera TV news positions, such as main (nonsports) news anchors, ancillary reporters, and weather reporters, the

**Table 6.** Race and Gender of KABC, KCBS, and KNBC Sports News Announcers.

	WM	BM	LM	AM	WF	BF	LF	AF
Anchors	85	46	40	46	0	0	0	0
Ancillary	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total	85	46	40	46	1	0	0	0
Percentage of total	39	21	18	21	>1	0	0	0

Note. WM = White male; BM = Black male; LM = Latino male; AM = Asian Pacific male; WF = White female; BF = Black female; LF = Latina female; AF = Asian Pacific female. Men 99.5%; White 39%; Women 0.5%; Black 21%; Latino 18%; Asian Pacific 21%.

position of sports news commentator remains mostly sex segregated. The 2009 data illustrating this pattern of racial diversity and occupational sex segregation are nearly identical to patterns in the 2004 data (Messner et al., 2006).

As Table 7 shows, *SportsCenter* evidences less racial diversity, but less sex segregation among its announcers than found on the local affiliates. Women announcers, however, appeared on the 11 p.m. broadcast of *SportsCenter* most often as ancillary reporters, and only rarely in the more central role as anchor announcers.

At 11%, *SportsCenter*'s proportion of women announcers during our 2009 sample is about the same as it was in 2004, when it was 12%. Compared with 2004, *SportsCenter*'s announcers were somewhat more racially diverse, especially among women announcers. In 2004, all 21 of *SportsCenter*'s women announcers were

**Table 7.** Race and Gender of *SportsCenter* Anchor and Ancillary Announcers.

	WM	BM	LM	AM	Other	WF	BF	LF	AF
Anchors	19	10	0	0	2	3	0	0	0
Ancillary	83	23	1	0	3	10	2	3	0
Total	102	33	1	0	5	13	2	3	0
Percentage of total	64	21	1	0	3	8	1	2	0

Note. WM = White male; BM = Black male; LM = Latino male; AM = Asian Pacific male; WF = White female; BF = Black female; LF = Latina female; AF = Asian Pacific female. Men 89%; White 72%; Women 11%; Black 22%; Latino 3%; Asian Pacific 0%; Other 3%.

White. In 2009, 5 of the 18 appearances by women announcers were by women of color, albeit all 5 appeared in ancillary announcer positions. The three instances where a woman appeared in the anchor position, she was White.

## Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The first "Gender and Televised Sports" report issued in 1990, nearly two decades after Title IX fueled an explosion of girls and women's athletic participation in the United States. The 1990 report heralded the recent surge of girls' participation in youth sports, the dramatic upswing of girls' and women's high school and college sports opportunities and participation, and the stirrings of growth in women's professional sports. The study concluded that since women's sports received only 5% of TV news coverage, people who get all or most of their information from television news would have little idea how dramatically sports had changed. One common response to the 1990 study was an optimistic view: Members of the public and many students with whom we discussed our findings assumed that TV news coverage was simply lagging behind the surging popularity of women's sports; they predicted that news media coverage would gradually catch up to the growing participation rates of girls and women in sport.

Twenty years later, this optimistic prediction of an evolutionary rise in TV news coverage of women's sports has proven to be wrong. During the ensuing two decades, girls' participation in youth sports has continued to rise (Sabo & Veliz, 2008; Staurowsky et al., 2009). 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 boy athletes still outnumbered girls, 3.4 million to 1.8 million. By 2009, the high school sports participation gap had closed further, with 4.4 million boys and 3.1 million girls playing (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2009). This trend is echoed in college sports. In 1972, the year Title IX was enacted there were only a little over two women's athletics teams per college. By 2010, the number had risen to 8.64 teams per NCAA school (Carpenter & Acosta, 2010). Women's professional sports, including the WNBA (founded in 1996) has developed a somewhat stronger foothold in the larger professional sports marketplace. However, during the past two decades of growth in women's sports, the gap between TV news and highlights shows' coverage of women's and men's sports has not narrowed, rather it has widened. Women's sports in 2009 received only 1.3% of the coverage on TV news, and 1.3% on ESPN's *SportsCenter*.

This deepening silence about women's sports in mainstream televised news and highlights shows is of particular concern for sports studies scholars, especially when considered alongside the fact that the world of sports is no longer a "male preserve," in which boys and men enjoy privileged and exclusive access to sport participation opportunities (Messner, 2002). To be sure, there is an expanding array of media sources of sports information, including Internet websites, which fans of women's sports can tap for news about their favorite athletes or teams.<sup>7</sup> Though it is nowhere near the level of the seemingly 24/7-live broadcasts of men's sports across the TV dial, the number of live broadcasts of women's sports has also expanded over the past 20 years (in 2003, ESPN began broadcasting the women's NCAA basketball tournament in its entirety on its sister station, ESPN 2). But television news and highlights shows remain two extremely important sources of sports information. Their continued tendency to ignore or marginalize women's sports helps maintain the myth that sports are exclusively by, about, and for men.

How can we explain the growing chasm between coverage of women's and men's sports? We are cautious in interpreting why coverage of women's sports has nearly evaporated, based entirely on our content analysis of the programming. To answer this "why" question would require a study that also focuses on the production of news and highlights shows. What assumptions and values guide the decisions of producers, editors, and TV sports commentators on what sports stories and events are important to cover, and how to cover them? When asked, producers, commentators, and editors will usually explain their lack of attention to women's sports claiming that they are constrained by a combination of market forces, and by their desire to give viewers "what they want to see." We understand programmers' desire to respond to market realities and viewer preferences. And while we recognize that ESPN and other media outlets conduct extensive marketing research to determine what to cover, when, and

how, we wish to engage the question of how it is that the coverage or lack thereof builds audiences for men's sports. If ESPN's marketing research were to show that viewers are more interested in men's sports, our theoretical orientation leads us to examine how it is that this interest is socially constructed; the media are one institution among many that promotes men's sports while ignoring women's sports. Not acknowledging the important role the media play in promoting men's sport through their coverage of visually and aurally exciting highlights and commentary downplays the power media institutions have to provide exciting and pleasurable experiences, which enhance the interest in and consumption of men's sport.

The expansion of new media has been accompanied by shrinking revenues for traditional mass media, leading to tighter budgets and staff cuts for traditional news outlets. In a March 2010 editorial blog, *Los Angeles Times* sports editor Mike James responded to reader complaints about the newspaper's lack of coverage of college women's basketball and other smaller market sports:

True, we haven't been covering a lot of women's basketball this season, aside from a couple of features, largely because women's basketball hasn't been a major draw in L.A. . . . Consequently, we have to make the difficult decisions every day on what events and sports we do cover and those that we can't. Our decision has been to try to make sure we reach the greatest number of readers we can with resources available, and regrettably, that means that some areas don't get much regular coverage. (Edgar, 2010)

James' lament about the impact of recent staff cuts at the *LA Times* would surely be echoed by hundreds of newspaper editors across the nation. As reporters and other sports news staff are cut, newspapers play it safe and assign their remaining staff to big-market sports teams that, they assume, "the greatest number of readers" want to read about. However, it is unlikely that the well-documented financial decline of print journalism can explain the declining coverage of women's sports in television news. And it certainly cannot explain the lack of coverage on ESPN's *SportsCenter*. In its 2010 media guide published for potential advertisers, ESPN claims that it is the "most viewed ad supported cable channel" and that the 2009 broadcast year was ESPN's "highest rated ever" (ESPN 2010, p. 5). Clearly, ESPN has no shortage of viewers, or presumably of advertising revenue, so in this case, the argument of shrinking budgets or budget cuts (e.g., which may be the case for newspapers) is not a convincing one. ESPN's decision to ignore women's sports must be due to other factors, which we discuss below.

ESPN tells potential advertisers that in 2009 it was the top cable network viewed consistently by men aged 18–54 and that it has been "men's favorite TV network since 1998" (ESPN, 2010, p. 5). Clearly, the ways in which ESPN targets its programming to male viewers is reflective of a larger trend, wherein TV producers carve out market niches that situate male viewers in the electronic equivalent of locker rooms characterized by male banter and ironic humor (Farred, 2000; Messner & Montez de Oca, 2005; Nylund, 2007).

A foundational assumption of those who create programming for men on programs like *SportsCenter* seems to be that the mostly male viewers want to think of women as sexual objects of desire, or perhaps as mothers, but not as powerful, competent, competitive athletes. This is a questionable assumption, especially given some of the latest data from the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center, which has found that across various demographic variables, including age and gender, when female athletes are portrayed as athletically competent, these images generated the greatest interest in women's sport, while the sexualized images of female athletes were the least likely to generate interest in women's sport (Kane & Maxwell, 2011). But even if this sexist assumption of male desire to see women as sex objects accurately captures the desires and values of a large swath of the U.S. male demographic that watches ESPN, it is probably inaccurate to operate from the same assumptions concerning viewers of evening TV news on their local affiliates. After all, a sports report on the evening and late night news is a short (2–5 min) segment embedded within a larger news report that is being viewed by a diverse audience. Presumably, a large proportion of TV news viewers are women, many of whom are unlikely to find the male-centric views of the locker room or its ironic, sexist banter to be very inviting. We wonder how many women—and indeed, how many men—simply tune out when the sports segment of the evening news begins.

In past iterations of this study, we pointed to the ways that sexist humor in sports commentary made fun of women and trivialized women athletes (and often women spectators at sporting events). We argued that this trivialization and sexualization of women in the news broadcasts served to marginalize women's sports, while also creating a viewing experience for male viewers that meshed neatly with the feeling of a locker room culture that affirms the centrality of men (Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Messner et al., 2003). In 2004, we noted a lessening of this sort of trivialization and sexualization of women in the broadcasts. Our 2009 study revealed that these practices nearly disappeared.

It is a positive development that sports news and highlights viewers are less often seeing disparaging and sexist portrayals of women (Bernstein, 2002; Daniels, 2009; Daniels & LaVoi, 2012). However, this decline in negative portrayals of women has not been accompanied by an increase in respectful, routine news coverage of women's sports. Instead, when the news and highlights shows ceased to portray women athletes in trivial and sexualized ways, they pretty much ceased to portray them at all.

The “women's sports history” segments during the month of March on *SportsCenter* offer an intriguing glimpse into programmers' assumptions about how to present women's sports to male viewers who are used to being fed a steady diet of men's sports. While these special segments had high technical quality, and were produced in ways that were respectful of the accomplishments of the women athletes, two elements were notable. First, these features were placed in a liminal space between regular *SportsCenter* stories and ESPN commercial breaks. Clearly, they were meant to be viewed as something different, separate, and apart from the

regular programming (which on most nights continued their normal coverage of mostly the “Big Three” men’s sports). Second, one of the features was narrated by the voice-over of the male fiancé of the woman athlete being featured. We interpret this as a strategy to make a woman athlete recognizable and palatable to a presumably male audience: In (mostly) rejecting the past practices of making a woman athlete familiar and “consumable” to a male audience by sexualizing her, producers in 2009 packaged the woman athlete instead as a family member, in a familiar role as mother, girlfriend, or wife.

Viewing the woman athlete through the male gaze of sexualized humor is apparently (and thankfully) now discredited; instead, now women athletes are being repackaged to be seen through another male gaze—as family members. This repackaging of women athletes meshes with the larger commercial project of packaging women athletes as heterosexual mothers/wives (most recently seen in the marketing and broadcast coverage of the 2012 Olympics). This practice has been criticized both for the ways in which it renders lesbian and other women athletes marginal or invisible and for the ways in which it maintains the public view of women athletes from the vantage point of men’s continued positions of centrality in social life.

Connected with the silencing of women athletes is the fact that the voices of women commentators continue to be entirely absent from the local affiliates’ sports news broadcasts, and heard very rarely on *SportsCenter*. Unlike TV news anchor, reporter, and weather announcer positions, the occupation of TV sports commentator continues to remain mostly sex segregated (Etling & Young, 2007; Sheffer & Schultz, 2007). Women have had a very difficult time breaking in to sports broadcasting, remaining relegated at best to marginal roles such as “sideline reporter” during an NBA or men’s college basketball game. Viewers of sports news and highlights shows continue to receive a constant barrage of words and images about men’s sports, narrated by a cacophony of men’s voices.

In the absence of audience research, we must be cautious in drawing conclusions about the meanings that TV viewers make of sports news and highlights shows. However, we can speculate on these questions, based on our analysis of the trends over the past 20 years, and the dominant meanings that are conveyed in the patterns of gendered coverage of sports stories.

It has been known for many years that sports news and highlights shows do not simply “give viewers what they want,” in some passive response to demand. Instead, there is a dynamic reciprocal relationship between commercial sports and the sports media. Media scholar Sut Jhally called this self-reinforcing monetary and promotional loop the “sports-media complex” (Jhally, 1984). When we add fans into this loop, we can see how information and pleasure enhancement are part of a circuit that promotes and actively builds audiences for men’s sports, while simultaneously providing profits for men’s sports organizations, commercial sponsors, and the sports media. Sports fans seek out news wraps and highlights of games—even of games they have already watched in their entirety—not simply for information, but because viewing these news broadcasts enhances and amplifies the



feelings—the tension, suspense, and exhilaration—they may have enjoyed a few hours earlier.

As such, TV news and highlights shows do not simply “reflect” fan interest in certain sports, as sports commentators and editors often argue. They also help generate and sustain enthusiasm for the sports they cover, thus becoming a key link in fans’ emotional connection to the agony and ecstasy of spectator sports. Fans of men’s sports—especially the Big Three of football, basketball, and baseball—become accustomed to having this fix routinely delivered to their living rooms. This emotional enhancement is but one element of the larger role of TV sports news in building audiences for men’s sports. Meanwhile, their silence, marginalization, and trivialization of women’s sports ensure smaller audiences for women’s sports, while keeping fans of women’s sports on emotional life support.

We have noted in past studies how a comparison of coverage of women’s and men’s NCAA basketball offers an especially valuable window into TV news’ audience-building functions (Messner et al., 1996). Our 2009 data enhance our understanding of how audience-building works. As we noted above, far less time was devoted to reporting on the women’s NCAA tournament than on the men’s. What was most striking in the 2009 study was the amount of time all of the news and highlight shows spent on (and the enthusiastic, even excited tone within which they couched) reports about upcoming men’s NCAA tournament seeds and matchups. Little or no such anticipatory reports on the women’s games appeared on the broadcasts within our sample. Even after the tournament games started, reports on the women’s games were, at best, typically relegated to the ticker. Meanwhile, the men’s tournament was receiving significant coverage in every broadcast.

Audience building for men’s sports permeates the mass media in a seemingly organic manner. As such, 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 an extensive apparatus of audience building for men’s sports. However, they rarely operate this way for women’s sports.

## Conclusion

Can these stubborn patterns of inequitable coverage of women’s sports be broken or changed? Clearly, the longitudinal data from our study show that there is no reason to expect an evolutionary growth in media coverage of women’s sports. To the contrary, our research shows that the proportion of coverage devoted to women’s sports on televised news over the past 20 years has actually declined, and there is no reason to believe that this trend will reverse itself in the next 20 years unless producers decide that it is in their interests to do so. For this to happen in a substantial way, power relations and perceptions of gender will have to continue to change within sport organizations, with commercial sponsors who promote and advertise sports, and within the mass media. These shifts in perception will not come about by themselves but will involve changes and pressures from a number of directions.

One important source of such change within the mass media would involve an affirmative move toward developing and supporting more women sports reporters and commentators. While we should be cautious in assuming that women reporters will necessarily cover sports differently from the ways that men do, there is some evidence to suggest that women sports reporters are less likely to cover women athletes in disrespectful ways, and more likely to advocate expanding the coverage of women's sports (Hardin & Whiteside, 2008; Kian & Hardin, 2009; LaVoi, Buysse, Maxwell, & Kane, 2007; Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002).

Sports organizations too can contribute to change by providing the sports media with more and better information about women athletes. Indeed, a longitudinal study shows that university sports information departments have vastly improved their presentation of women's sports in their annual media guides (Kane & Buysse, 2005). Sports fans can also be an active part of this loop to promote change: Audience members can complain directly to the producers of sports programs—to tell them that they do not appreciate sexist treatment of women in sports news and highlights shows and that they want to see more and better coverage of actual women's sports. That is why, perhaps, they call it “demand.”

Overall, we find the results of this study to be discouraging. Clearly, change has happened, but not in the direction of improved coverage of women's sports. In recent years, sports news and highlights shows have evidenced a retrenchment, expressed through a narrowed focus on a few commercially central men's sports.

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### **Notes**

1. We agree with an anonymous reviewer that research on production practices and audience reception are necessary to further illuminate the editorial and programmatic choices media producers make. However, in this article, we argue that media content—the amount of

coverage and the quality of coverage—*builds* audiences for sport. There is not a natural, innate interest in the “Big Three” men’s sports. Rather, increased coverage and high-quality production values provide an exciting viewer experience that enables audience interest. The data illustrate that the coverage enables and facilitates audience interest in men’s sport while constrains and limits interest in women’s sport.

2. Here we cite the 2008 report, given our sample is from 2009. Thus, the 2008 report is the best indicator of sports newsrooms at the time we collected data.
3. In every study, only the trained research assistant codes the data in the quantitative analysis. Thus, since there is only one coder, intercoder reliability is not necessary.
4. One reviewer noted the sampling method eliminated important women’s sports events including the WNBA finals or Wimbledon. Here, the following weeks were selected to provide continuity with previous studies. The sampling dates originated in the 1989 data collection, nearly 10 years before the advent of the WNBA. In order to make consistent comparisons across time, the same time frames were sampled for every study. While we might expect to see more coverage following these events, the data itself would suggest otherwise. For example, our comparison between the NBA and WNBA showed that during the WNBA season (July), there was more coverage of the NBA, which was out of season during that 2-week sample period.
5. See the appendix in the “Gender in Televised Sports” report for a list of women’s sports events during the time frame of the study. <http://dornsife.usc.edu/cfr/gender-in-televised-sports/>.
6. The first author frequently encountered people who rationalized the lack of media coverage of the women’s U Conn team to the fact that they were undefeated and thus it would be “boring” to cover women’s basketball since it was obvious U Conn was going to win the tournament.
7. Shortly after the online release of the “Gender in Televised Sports” report, ESPN launched a new website devoted to “women sports fans,” [espnw.com](http://espnw.com). Here it is important to note that the website’s goal is not to solely to cover women’s sports, although the website aspires to be “your primary destination for women’s sports.” It also aims to cover sports in ways that appeal to women sports fans, as its tag, “an online destination for female sports fans and athletes” and its goal to “connect female sports fans to the sports they love,” suggests (<http://espn.go.com/espnw/about>).

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