

“FROM FIZZLE TO SIZZLE!”

Televised Sports News and the Production of Gender-Bland Sexism

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This article draws upon data collected as part of a 25-year longitudinal analysis of televised coverage of women’s sports to provide a window into how sexism operates during a postfeminist sociohistorical moment. As the gender order has shifted to incorporate girls’ and women’s movement into the masculine realm of sports, coverage of women’s sports has shifted away from overtly denigrating coverage in 1989 to ostensibly respectful but lackluster coverage in 2014. To theorize this shift, we introduce the concept of “gender-bland sexism,” a contemporary gender framework that superficially extends the principles of merit to women in sports. Televised news and highlight shows frame women in uninspired ways, making women’s athletic accomplishments appear lackluster compared to those of men’s. Because this “bland” language normalizes a hierarchy between men’s and women’s sports while simultaneously avoiding charges of overt sexism, this article

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contributes to gender theory by illuminating how women can be marginalized in male-dominated, male-controlled settings via individualized merit-based assessments of talent.

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Within the United States, women have made dramatic inroads into realms once considered only appropriate for men, such as sport, higher education, and the workforce (England 2010; Messner 2011). Now girls' and women's accomplishments also are visibly celebrated in music, movies, TV shows, and broader cultural discourses (Banet-Weiser 2015; McRobbie 2004). These discourses frame girls and women as having lives full of limitless possibility and as confident, talented, high-achieving leaders (Baker 2009; Kindlon 2006; Messner 2011). Because of sweeping changes such as these, it is widely assumed that girls can do anything boys can do (Messner 2009; Ringrose 2007), and the "postfeminist" assumption that gender equality is achieved has "seeped into western popular culture and social life" (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013, 186).

Despite popular conceptions that the United States has stripped away barriers once limiting girls' and women's opportunities, progress toward gender equity is uneven (Connell 2009; England 2010; Messner 2000). The percentage of women employed full-time has leveled since the 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004), men have not moved into traditionally female-dominated fields at the same rate that women have moved into male-dominated ones (Charles and Grusky 2004; England 2010), and many educational fields and occupations remain overwhelmingly sex-segregated (Gauchat, Kelly, and Wallace 2012). In sport, men dominate coaching positions (Acosta and Carpenter 2014; Messner 2009), women professional athletes earn a small fraction of men's earnings and sponsorships (Women's Sports Foundation 2015), and men own the vast majority of professional sports teams (Lapchick 2013). Yet within a postfeminist sociohistorical moment in which the gender order has shifted to ostensibly incorporate girls and women into many aspects of the public sphere, it may be the case that sexism occurs in more covert ways than before. What are the processes legitimizing and naturalizing contemporary forms of gender inequality? Have these processes changed over time? If so, how?

To answer these questions, this article draws upon data collected as part of a 25-year longitudinal analysis of televised coverage of women's sports. There are three reasons why we use sport as an empirical window into the processes normalizing contemporary forms of gender inequality. First, televised sports news and highlights shows operate as part of a

mega-billion-dollar institutionalized sports-media complex (Jhally 1984), one that has historically excluded women and celebrated the supposed bodily superiority of men (Kane 1995; Messner 1988). Forbes estimated the sports market was worth more than \$60 billion USD in 2014, and this market is projected to reach \$73.5 billion by 2019 (Heitner 2015). Second, sex segregation in sport is both legally enforced and culturally accepted; there are women's sports, and there are men's sports, and rarely do the two meet. Because gender is often highly salient within sex-segregated settings (Messner 2000; Ridgeway 2009), sport may illuminate underlying gender dynamics that are obscured within other realms.

Finally, contesting men's dominance has been especially difficult within institutions such as sport, the military, and blue-collar workplaces, where high value is placed on large body size, physical strength, aggression or violence (Charles and Grusky 2004; Connell 2009). Even as girls' and women's athletic participation has exploded, sport has remained a male-dominated, male-controlled institution. This is particularly so for sports media, where 90.1 percent of editors, 90.2 percent of assistant editors, 87.6 percent of columnists, 87.4 percent of reporters, and 80.8 percent of copy editors and designers are male (Lapchick 2014). Our longitudinal research finds similar trends in televised sports news; men comprise approximately 95 percent of anchors, co-anchors, and analysts (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). Identifying the gender-based frameworks through which sports anchors and commentators make sense of women's movement into sport may provide insight into the processes that reinforce male privilege and power within male-dominated settings more broadly.

By comparing the quality of men's and women's sports coverage from 1989 to 2014, we argue that coverage of women's sports has shifted away from being overtly denigrating to being ostensibly "respectful." To theorize this shift, we introduce the concept of "gender-bland sexism," a contemporary gender framework through which sports commentators and anchors make sense of women's movement into the masculine realm of sport. The current strategy for inclusion in TV news and highlight shows is found in a gender-bland form of sexism, which frames women in a lackluster and uninspired manner. Televised news and highlight shows cover women's athletic accomplishments in ways that are devoid of overt sexism but simultaneously perpetuate beliefs about men's inherent athletic superiority. Because gender-bland sexism superficially extends the principles of merit and fairness to women in sport in ways that reinforce gender hierarchies, this article contributes to gender theory by illuminating how gender inequality can be covertly codified as individualized

assessments of merit during a moment in which women and men are perceived as equal.

SHIFTING FORMS OF SEXISM IN SPORTS MEDIA

The past half-century has seen a sea change in the ways girls and women relate to sports. Organized sport has historically excluded women and celebrated the supposed bodily superiority of men (Messner 1988), but girls' and women's athletic participation skyrocketed in the late 1970s (Acosta and Carpenter 2014; National Federation of State High School Associations 2016). The dramatic movement of girls and women into sports has challenged assumptions of natural and categorical male athletic superiority in daily interactions and institutional arrangements (Cooky 2010; Messner 2002; Musto 2014).

Gender relations in sport, however, remain contested terrain (Messner 1988, 2002). In the symbolic realm, media coverage of women's sports has historically lagged far behind men's. With minor exceptions such as during the Olympics, the vast majority of media coverage focuses on men (Billings and Young 2015; Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015; Kane, LaVoi, and Fink 2013). Research also finds that broadcast coverage depicts men's events in more visually exciting ways by using more camera angles, shot types, and special effects (Greer, Hardin, and Homan 2009). Sports media coverage also characterizes women athletes as sexual objects (Messner and Montez De Oca 2005; Kim and Sagas 2014), depicts women off the court and out of uniform (Buisse and Embser-Herbert 2004), and emphasizes women's adherence to heterofemininity (Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum 2013; Musto and McGann 2016). When coupled with the overwhelmingly large quantitative coverage of men's sports, the dominant framing of women in sports media has been historically to build audience interest in men's sports and to mute the challenge women's athleticism poses to ideologies of natural male superiority (Kane 1995; Messner 1988).

Existing literature on gender and sports media, however, often focuses on a single moment in time. This body of research has developed a nuanced understanding of whether and how hegemonic masculinity operates within sports media, but longitudinal studies are uniquely positioned to identify changes in the quality of women's sports coverage. Indeed, in light of broader societal changes, it is likely the case that the "rules of representation" of women's sports have shifted (Bruce 2015; Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum 2013; Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015; Messner,

Duncan, and Cooky 2003). For example, in Bruce's (2015) comprehensive assessment of sport, gender, and media coverage, she finds that women's sports coverage used to be characterized by lower production values, gender marking, and ambivalence. However, the emergence of online and social media has encouraged the development of a "pretty but powerful" discourse. As evidenced by the appearance of high-profile women athletes in *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue* or in advertising campaigns, women athletes have challenged the conventional linkage between sports and hegemonic masculinity (Heywood and Dworkin 2003). Despite this, women athletes' power resides alongside their heterosexual appeal in ways that is grounded in consumer culture and often commodifies sexuality, desire, and feminism (Banet-Weiser 2015; Gill 2016; McRobbie 2004). Such results suggest that within a postfeminist cultural moment in which sports news and highlight shows have been pressured to move beyond ignoring or denigrating women (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015), women athletes face different forms of sexism than before.

This study identifies how forms of sexism have changed within sports media, and we draw upon the concepts of "color blind racism" and "gender blind sexism" to help theorize this shift. In the post-Jim Crow, post-Civil Rights era, Bonilla-Silva (2006) asserts that color-blind racism superficially extends "the principles of liberalism to racial matters," which results in "raceless" explanations of racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 1364). By couching contemporary forms of racism in ostensibly nonracial ways—such as when whites describe school or residential segregation as matters of individual "choice"—color-blind racial discourses make the dynamics undergirding structural racism difficult to detect and label. Recently, gender scholars have extended Bonilla-Silva's concept to describe similar dynamics regarding contemporary forms of gender inequality. In a study on rape myth acceptance, Stoll, Lilley, and Pinter define gender-blind sexism as "predicated on the assumption that because society is now 'post-gender,' what sexism remains resides only in *individual* acts of prejudice or discrimination on the part of sexist persons who are out of touch with mainstream beliefs about gender" (2017, 30 emphasis in original).

Building upon this line of work, we introduce the term "gender-bland sexism." Gender-bland sexism is similar to gender-blind sexism in that both operate "in a political climate in which blatant sexism is supposedly rejected, yet sexist ideologies, policies, and practices continue" (Stoll, Lilley, and Pinter 2017, 30). Yet rather than being "blind" to gender differences, the salience of gender within the largely sex-segregated setting

of sport encourages sports commentators and anchors to render women athletes visible in ways that makes women's athletic accomplishments appear lackluster compared to men's. This "bland" language normalizes a hierarchy between men's and women's sports while simultaneously avoiding charges of overt sexism; sexism in sport is now codified as an assessment of each individual athlete's merit and talent. Consequently, gender-bland sexism reinforces gender boundaries and hierarchies, presenting a fictitious view of inherent male superiority in a way that is subtler and more difficult to detect than before.

METHODS

This project uses content analysis to analyze data collected as part of a 25-year content analysis of women's sports coverage in televised media. Data were first gathered in 1989, with follow-up studies conducted once every five years in 1993, 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014. Following the methods and procedures from previous studies (see Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015), in 2014 we examined six weeks of evening (6 p.m.) and late-night sports news (11 p.m.) on three Los Angeles-based network affiliate stations (KCBS, KNBC, and KABC), and three weeks of the hour-long national broadcasts of ESPN's *SportsCenter* stratified by sport season: March 16-29, 2014 (basketball); July 13-26, 2014 (baseball); and November 9-22, 2014 (football).

In the most recent iteration of this study, we coded and analyzed data in three stages. In Stage 1, the first author viewed all recorded programs, quantitatively coding the March data and qualitatively coding data for the three recording periods (i.e., March, July, and November). Next, the second author viewed all recordings and independently coded the quantitative March data. Two undergraduate research assistants received training on the quantitative coding and independently coded quantitative March data. The percentage agreement for inter-rater reliability was approximately 95 percent, well above what is considered an acceptable level of concordance (Fleiss, Levin, and Cho Paik 2005). Once inter-rater reliability was achieved, the second author and the undergraduate research assistants completed the quantitative coding for July and November. In Stage 2, the second author independently viewed all of the recordings and, sensitized to themes from the quantitative findings, qualitatively analyzed the commentary. Finally, in Stage 3, the second author ran descriptive statistics on the coded data, and the third author compiled the results.

Similar to previous iterations (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015), for the 2014 study we coded more than 20 distinct categories, including the gender of sport (male, female, and neutral), type of sport (basketball, football, etc.), competitive level of the sport (professional, college, high school, etc.), and segment's length of time. We also quantified production values, tracking whether segments included music, graphics, interviews, and game highlights (coded as yes/no). In addition to quantitative codes, we conducted a qualitative analysis of each segment's video, visuals, graphics, audio, and commentary. To examine underlying patterns in the way sports news and highlight shows represented women's and men's sports, we examined the extent to which sports segments discussed (a) the competitive aspects of the sport, such as games/matches, game highlights, scores and statistics, outcomes, and historical significance; (b) athletes' athletic competence (or lack thereof); (c) athletes' personal characteristics, such as their families or personal relationships; and (d) athletes in ways that drew upon sexualizing or objectifying language or humor. We also compared how the coverage of women's sports in our sample changed or remained the same since prior data collection years, thus enabling us to identify continuities and discontinuities in the last 25 years of coverage.

One emergent theme in our 2014 data concerned how the mostly male broadcasters presented and discussed women's sports in comparison to men's, and specifically *how* this presentation had shifted over time. Consequently, in this paper we foreground results from the most recent iteration of data collection (conducted in 2014), while comparing these results to previous data collected in 1989, 1993, 1999, 2004, and 2009. We use these media representations of women athletes as a window into examining how sexism operates within the realm of sport as broadcasters and anchors perform their jobs of reporting sports news.

SHIFTING MECHANISMS OF CONTAINMENT OF WOMEN'S SPORTS

Against the backdrop of girls' and women's skyrocketing sports participation, our longitudinal study has consistently illuminated a dearth of women's sports coverage (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). In 2014, televised news and highlights shows' coverage of women's sports hovered around 3 percent of airtime. This silence continues to be a major mechanism undermining the challenge women's athleticism poses to ideologies

of natural male superiority (Duncan and Hasbrook 2002; Messner 2002; Tuchman 2000). Moreover, as we discuss in the following section, consistent with past iterations of our longitudinal study, the 2014 women's sports coverage was characterized by low production values relative to men's. Despite this quantitative continuity in the reporting of sports news, there have been significant shifts away from overt sexism in the framing of women's sports and women athletes. Specifically, over the last 25 years, the mostly male commentators have shifted from overtly sexist portrayals, to ambivalent depictions, to a respectful but boring rendering of women athletes.

For the first decade of our study, from 1989 to 1999, commentators routinely discussed women athletes in overtly sexist and denigrating ways. Commentators snickered with sexual innuendo when showing bikini-clad women spectators at a men's baseball game or leering at conventionally beautiful professional women athletes (Messner, Duncan, and Cooky 2003; Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993). In 1999, KABC featured a professional tennis match between Mary Pierce and Anna Kournikova. As exemplified by fans selecting her as the "Hottest Female Athlete" for the ESPN.com 1998 poll, Kournikova was well-known for her heterosexy appearance and sex appeal rather than her athleticism. Although Kournikova had never won a singles tournament, for a time she was ranked number one as a doubles player. Noting Pavel Bure, Kournikova's then-boyfriend and NHL hockey player, in the crowd the commentator explained, "That's what it takes to date Anna 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!"

From 1999 through 2009, however, the framing of women athletes in televised sports news changed. Instead of sexually objectifying women, commentators increasingly deployed an "ambivalent" frame around women's sports. For example, a 2009 KABC story on beach volleyball Olympic champion Kerri Walsh-Jennings mentioned her husband's volleyball win that day, and Walsh-Jennings' own announcement that she was returning to play only two months after giving birth. However, over the 25-year span of our study coverage of male athletes, rarely—if ever—did they include discussions of men as fathers, husbands, or boyfriends. Despite recognizing women's athletic accomplishments, this frame continued to marginalize women by emphasizing their adherence to the conventionally heterofeminine roles of wives, mothers, or girlfriends (Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum 2013; Messner, Duncan, and Willms 2006).

By 2014, however, overt sexism and ambivalent depictions of women athletes had declined. We saw almost none of the humorous denigration of women athletes and women's sports and only some continued ambivalence. This decline may be in part due to the overall decline of coverage of women's sports, which represented less than 3 percent of the total sports coverage (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). Yet in 2014, the dominant frame we observed was a dull—neither overtly sexist nor ambivalent—rendering of women's sporting events. In what follows, we compare men's and women's sport coverage from 2014, identifying four forms of narrative work anchors used when covering men's sports: high production values and techniques; fast-paced, humorous, action-packed language; dominant descriptors; and lavish compliments. Because news and highlight shows rarely used these same narrative strategies when covering women's sports, we argue that the matter-of-fact, monotonous, lackluster delivery style of women's sports coverage operated as a form of "gender-bland sexism." Rather than marginalizing women through overt denigration or ambivalent depictions, gender-bland sexism disguises sexism against women athletes as reactions to individual merit and performance, thus normalizing a hierarchy between men's and women's sports in a way that is both subtle and difficult to detect.

High Production Values and Techniques

Since the 1980s, broadcast coverage of women's sports has consistently had lower production value than men's (Bruce 2015). By using fewer camera angles, statistics and graphics, and lower sound quality, sports media depict women's sports in less dramatic and spectacular ways than men's (Messner, Duncan, and Wachs 1990, 24). We similarly found televised news and highlight shows aired lengthy, highly produced stories about men's sports in 2014. *SportsCenter's* segments on men's sports averaged two minutes five seconds in length, with stories about men's sports on the local affiliate stations averaging 47 seconds. Players, coaches, and other important sports figures such as franchise general managers were interviewed in one out of every three men's sports stories on *SportsCenter* and the local affiliate stations. These interviews, which ranged from athletes' first-person experiences to insights from those responsible for the rules and policies of the game, offered viewers in-depth perspectives into men's sports. Furthermore, game footage accompanied most of men's sports segments—83.1 percent of local news and 88.6 percent of *SportsCenter* stories. This footage highlighted spectacular plays, breath-taking saves, and competitive achievements, and

sports news shows often showcased the excitement of male athletes' physicality by replaying the footage in slow-motion and from multiple camera angles. Finally, graphics were included in 83.9 percent of men's segments on the local news and 95.5 percent of men's segments on *SportsCenter*. These graphics enhanced the audience's viewing experience by showcasing pictures of star athletes or team logos and providing viewers with a cornucopia of statistics, such as details about the final scores of games, team win/loss records, and team rankings within their leagues.

Many of these production techniques were evident when *SportsCenter* commentators discussed the results of a Celtics versus Mavericks game on St. Patrick's Day:

The camera pans across the studio to a television, which shows the Celtics and Mavericks team logos. Green lights frame the television and Irish music plays in the background. One commentators says, "St. Patrick's day! I mean you gotta have something about the Celtics!" Game footage is shown next. A graphic at the bottom of the screen shows the Celtic's logo and says, "Zero-to-14 on the road this season versus Western Conference teams." The anchor discusses game highlights as *SportsCenter* replays footage of the Celtics missing basket after basket. One of the anchors groans and says, "Jeff Green, I mean a guy named Green on Saint—uh . . . no." Green takes a shot, and misses. Then, ESPN uses special effects to replace the basketball with a pot of gold. Rainbows and sparkles fly around the basketball hoop whenever the Celtics score. One of the commentators excitedly calls out, "Whoa, looks like the liquid light show!" Gold spews out of the pot as a player dunks the ball. The other commentator adds, "We're here to entertain!"

When taken at face value, a story about the Celtics losing yet another basketball game may not seem to warrant coverage on *SportsCenter*. However, by using production techniques such as holiday-themed music, green lights, and special effects, *SportsCenter* turned an otherwise unimportant segment into a dramatic, "must watch" event designed to entertain viewers.

Women's sport segments, by contrast, usually lacked the production techniques routinely embedded within men's sport segments. Women's stories averaged one minute 17 seconds on *SportsCenter*—nearly 50 percent shorter than men's sports stories—and 44 seconds on the local affiliates. Whereas the men's "Big Three" (professional and college football, basketball, and baseball) were covered regardless of whether they were *in or out of season or whether teams won or lost* (Cooky, Messner, and

Musto 2015), broadcasts tended to feature only the most exceptional of women's sports accomplishments. Furthermore, the *type* of game footage replayed in women's sports segments also differed (Buisse and Embser-Herbert 2004). Instead of featuring in-action game footage, especially slow-motion replays where women displayed physicality or engaged in bodily contact, women's sports segments often featured athletes as supporters. Women were frequently shown on the bench cheering for their teammates or hugging one another while celebrating a victory.

Interviews and graphics also subtly marked women's sports as different—and inferior—to men's. Only one out of every four stories on the local affiliates and *none* of the *SportsCenter* women's sports stories included interviews. Graphics appeared in women's sports segments more frequently than in men's segments (90.6 percent of local news segments and 100 percent of *SportsCenter* segments), but this also marked women's sports as different. On men's sports segments, graphics and special effects often were used in entertaining ways, such as when *SportsCenter* used pots of gold during the previously mentioned St. Patrick's Day game. Graphics were *never* used in fun, humorous ways when covering women's sport, and instead they conveyed more routine information, such as depicting team mascots or team logos.

While lower production values in segments on women's sports were characteristic of our data across the span of our longitudinal study, there have been important changes over time. In past iterations, we documented higher production values in segments depicting female athletes squarely within the conventions of heteronormative femininity, either as sexual objects or as wives, mothers, and girlfriends. Conversely, we documented lower production values in segments featuring women primarily as athletes. Given the overall decline of sexualization or ambivalent framing of women athletes, the shift to primarily covering women *as athletes* thus has been accompanied with a shift toward overall lower production values in segments on women's sports. Less frequent coverage coupled with lower production values renders women's athletic competence, performance, and achievements unremarkable under the shadow cast by the exciting wall-to-wall coverage of men's athletic performances (Buisse and Embser-Herbert 2004; Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). Consequently, by symbolically positioning men's sports as "naturally" more interesting and exciting, the higher production value embedded within men's sports segments helped legitimize the exclusion of women from sports news coverage, albeit in a subtler manner than before.

Fast-Paced, Humorous, Action-Packed Language

Unlike the even-toned delivery style typically heard on nonsports news programs such as *CNN Newsroom* or *NBC Nightly News*, sports commentators consistently deployed vocal inflections, high-volume exclamations, and rapid-fire speech when discussing men's sports. For example, anchors often loudly cheered or exclaimed when discussing game highlights, such as during a *SportsCenter* segment featuring the Florida versus Kentucky men's National College Athletic Association (NCAA) "March Madness" basketball game. As a Kentucky player scored, a commentator loudly exclaimed, "Holla!" Anchors also peppered their loud, fast-paced commentary with descriptive, action-packed language. On all four networks, commentators routinely described men's sports with action verbs such as *nailed*, *smoked*, *ripped*, *exploded*, *zipped*, *clawed*, *drained*, *murdered*, *attacked*, *chipped*, and *swarmed*. When discussing the results of a Chicago Blackhawks versus Philadelphia Flyers National Hockey League (NHL) game, a *SportsCenter* commentator described a player as "get[ting] sniper, wicked, nasty, all sorts of words I've never even heard before!" Another time, *SportsCenter* replayed highlights from a Florida State versus University of Miami college football game. As a Florida State player successfully rushed through Miami's defense, the commentator exclaimed, "Like a hot knife through butter!"

Commentators also often used nicknames or made jokes when referring to men players, teams, and important sporting events. The men's March Madness tournament was regularly called "The Dance." On the local affiliates, the National Basketball Association (NBA) Los Angeles Clippers games were called "The Blake Show" and "Lob City," due to Blake Griffin's and DeAndre Jordan's dunking abilities. On all four stations, NBA player Kobe Bryant and Major League Baseball (MLB) player Félix Hernández were respectively called "The Mamba" and "King Félix." In addition, sports commentators regularly included endearing comedic observations about players. For example, during a *SportsCenter* segment where White Sox outfielder Blake Tekotte caught the baseball, the commentator riffed on the similarity between Tekotte's name and the Mexican beer Tecate. He bellowed, "BARTENDER! How about a Tekotte? . . . Woo! He went import on us!" Another *SportsCenter* broadcast included highlights from a National Football League (NFL) Panthers vs. Eagles game, and the commentator joked, "Only your local grocery store has more sacks than the Eagles in this game!"

These clever word plays and comedic observations were not limited to teams or athletes with impressive performances. While it might be

expected that having one of the worst seasons in NBA history would be justification for not covering that team on the highlight shows, this was not the case. The Philadelphia 76ers had lost 22 games in a row and were on track to having one of the worst seasons in NBA history, but televised news and highlight shows continued to regularly cover their games. In one segment, *SportsCenter* employed special effects so it would appear as if the 76ers were shooting bricks at the hoop instead of basketballs. As members of the 76ers team missed shot after shot, the commentator cried, "Wow, that's a real brick!," "Brick it up, brick it up!," and "Let's build a house, shall we?" The commentators' vocal intonations and jokes turned a less than inspiring game into an interesting one.

Fast-paced, funny, action-packed language was largely absent from women's sports coverage. Instead, women's sports were normally presented in a monotone, uninspired, "matter-of-fact" style. The following example illustrates the difference in delivery of men's sports compared to that of women's in *SportsCenter*'s "Top Ten Plays" segment:

The tenth best play of the day is awarded to an India vs. Pakistan men's cricket game, with a commentator saying India had a "wicked victory." The ninth best play goes to Missy Franklin, "who competed at the women's NCAA swimming and diving championship today." The commentator says, "Missy Franklin. In the NCAA women's swimming and diving championship. Way ahead of the pack in the 200-yard freestyle. Wins easily." The commentators also note that she "sets the American, NCAA and U.S. Open record in the event." The seventh best play goes to a golfer at the Arnold Palmer golf invitational, who sunk a 116-foot shot. In a voice-over the ESPN commentator exclaims, "That's what I'm talking about!" Number six is from a spring training MLB game between the Cubs and the White Sox. The second baseman catches the ball and tags a player out, and a commentator gushes, "I think he's ready for the regular season! Let's get it going!" Number four is from the Heat vs. Grizzlies basketball game, showing Ray Allen scoring. The voice-over from the in-studio commentator exclaims, "*From fizzle to sizzle!*"

If one were to rank the sports achievements included in this segment, winning an NCAA championship in multiple record-breaking time is likely a more noteworthy athletic accomplishment than the more routine men's events presented (i.e., tagging a player out at second base during a pre-season game or scoring during a regular season game). Yet the quality of the commentators' delivery of the men's stories sizzled, while their delivery in describing Franklin's record-shattering swim fizzled. Instead of exclaiming that Franklin had a "wicked victory!" or "got it going!" the commentator flatly observed Franklin was "way ahead" and "wins easily."

The coverage of Franklin also lacked the exciting language (e.g., “that’s what I’m talking about!”) included in the verbal delivery of men’s sports. The flat, matter-of-fact style of commentary in this segment was typical of the bland way women’s sports were covered.

In previous iterations of this study, women were often included on sports news shows as gag features (Duncan, Messner, and Cooky 2000; Messner, Duncan, and Cooky 2003), which situated women as outsiders in the male-dominated space of sports news. For example, in 2004, *SportsCenter* ran a 13-second story on a “weightlifting granny.” One commentator 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.” In 2014, these sorts of trivializing gag features had mostly disappeared from sports news and highlights shows, but commentators’ *lack* of humor ironically continues to mark women as different. In segments on men’s sports, sports commentators used humor to convey excitement for men’s athletic prowess. This form of narrative work functions as a type of verbal “horseplay” (Ainsworth, Batty, and Burchielli 2014; Gregory 2009), creating opportunities for the presumably male audiences to bond with the mostly male commentators. This language, moreover, is flexible enough to be applied to any situation (Sargent 2009), ensuring that even segments about underperforming men’s teams remained interesting. While it is now rare for anchors to humorously sexualize women athletes, humor continues to be used on televised sports news shows to subtly mark women’s sports as different. Reserving fast-paced, funny, and descriptive language for men’s sports coverage “otherizes softly” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 3), allowing sports news shows to construct symbolically men’s sports as more interesting while subtly drawing attention to women’s inferiority through bland coverage.

Dominant Language

Commentators regularly employed dominant descriptors and agentic language when discussing male athletes and men’s teams, characterizing men as firmly in control of events that transpired during games. In July, for example, *SportsCenter* featured a segment about Andrew Wiggins, a Minnesota Timberwolves basketball player. Footage from the 76ers vs. Timberwolves game was shown as the commentator narrates:

On Monday, [Wiggins] put two 76ers defenders in the spin cycle, throwing down a monstrous two-handed jam before Nerlens Noel could even get

there. And Wiggins doin' it on D! Noel was victim to one of his highlight blocks in the same game, and Spurs rookie Kyle Anderson [was] also rejected by Wiggins on Sunday.

Not only is Wiggins described as putting two 76ers "in the spin cycle" as he completed a "monstrous two-handed jam," but the commentator also said that two other men fell "victim" to Wiggins' "highlight blocks." Wiggins was not the only man whose athletic abilities were described with dominant language. When covering the British Open, commentators on all four networks used dominant phrases to describe golfer Ray McIlroy, saying he was "dialed in," "[in] complete control," "the one who's reigning," and that he "grabbed the Claret Jug by the throat." Commentators' use of dominant language framed men's sports as exciting battles where heroic athletes powerfully asserted their will as they dominated other athletes and opposing teams.

In contrast, when women's sports were covered, dominant language was almost always missing from commentators' analysis. Commentators instead described women's competitive accomplishments in a "just the facts" manner. For example, in March, *SportsCenter* awarded an ESPN "Star of the Night" to Shannon Szabados, an Olympic gold medalist and the first woman to play in a Canadian men's professional hockey league. The commentator explained, "She had 27 saves, it was a 4-3 loss for her Columbus Cottonmouths to the visiting Knoxville Ice Bears in the Southern Professional Hockey League, but Shannon Szabados did work." Despite Szabados' historic accomplishments, commentators did not use dominant language to describe her performance. Instead of pointing to the men who fell "victim" to her "highlight blocks" or describing her as "dialed in," the discussion of her performance could not have been more literal. The commentator blandly concluded that she "did work."

In earlier iterations of this study, commentators described women athletes in ways that overtly conveyed beliefs pertaining to their inherent weakness and inferiority. For example, in 1993, commentators described one collegiate woman basketball player as, "... tiny, she's small, but so effective under the boards," and another basketball player as having a "little jump hook." In 2014, we uncovered no similar descriptions of women. Despite shifting away from comments that overtly conveyed women's weakness, commentators did not describe women with the same dominant language frequently found in coverage of men's sports, thus helping to reinforce perceptions of male athletes' inherent superiority in a more covert way than before.

Lavish Compliments

Sports commentators frequently gave male athletes lavish compliments when discussing their accomplishments and performances. For example, when covering a St. Louis vs. Arizona NFL game on ESPN, Patrick Peterson was shown catching the football. At first, the ball bounced off Peterson's fingertips, but he lurched forward and caught it. The commentator excitedly cried, "Oh, what an athletic play by Patrick Peterson!" Another commentator also complimented Peterson by saying, "You know, when you talk about real athleticism, being able to tip that ball with his left hand, refocus, get to it, and then run it in—I mean I wish I could have done that at some point in my career! Had that kind of athleticism." Later in the same segment, a clip of quarterback Matthew Stafford passing the football was shown. One of the commentators said, "It's everything every quarterback coach tells you not to do because you don't have the arm talent, but this guy does!" These compliments helped construct male athletes as exceptionally skilled stars at the pinnacle of athletic greatness.

On the rare occasion a commentator praised women's athletic accomplishments, their compliments tended to be restrained and less generous in their attributions. For example, a *SportsCenter* segment discussed the University of Connecticut women's basketball team's 47-game winning streak. This segment included game footage of UConn player Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis sinking a 3-point shot. The in-studio commentator says, "Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis has the best shot in all of basketball." Those aren't my words. Those are the words of Geno Auriemma. And he says at any level. Best shot at *any level*." This was one of the rare moments when commentary included praise for female athletes, apparently comparing Mosqueda-Lewis favorably to men. The anchor, however, quickly attributed the compliment to Mosqueda-Lewis' coach, thus distancing himself from Auriemma's words. Ambivalence toward complimenting female athletes also was noticeable when *SportsCenter* discussed the results of the DePaul versus Oklahoma women's basketball game: "I'll tell you what the women did in the Oklahoma-DePaul game. They outscored every men's basketball game." One of the anchors said, "It was quite an impressive watching," and the other anchor added, "Good basketball." Although sports commentators regularly called men's athletic accomplishments "perfect," "beautiful," "amazing," and "incredible," the results of the DePaul and Oklahoma game—the highest scoring game of the night—were simply described, with little vocal enthusiasm, as "good basketball" and "quite an impressive watching."

In previous iterations of this study, women's athletic accomplishments were often framed in overtly insulting ways. For example, in 2000, golfer Patty Sheehan was shown driving her ball straight into the water, as commentators said, "Whoa! That shot needs just a little work, Patty. She was out of the hunt in the Boston Big Five Classic." The 2014 iteration of our study found no similar instances of insulting or degrading comments directed toward women athletes, but commentators rarely gave women lavish compliments. A net effect of presenting women's sporting events with "just the facts" was to render women's athletic accomplishments as unexciting and less impressive when compared to men's, thus conveying beliefs about men's inherent superiority in a more covert manner than in the past.

CONCLUSION

For a quarter century, our study has chronicled a consistent dearth of women's sports coverage within televised news and highlight shows. Even as girls and women play sports in growing numbers, sports coverage continues to devote most of its time to men's sports—especially men's football, basketball, and baseball. On the rare occasion when women's sports are covered, their segments tend to be shorter and lack the same high-quality production values regularly applied to men's stories. The stubborn persistence of the lower quantitative coverage and the poor production values marginalize women within the male-dominated, male-controlled institution of sport. High-quality coverage builds audience knowledge, interest, and excitement for men's central sports, whereas the programs' lack of focus on women stunts interest in women's sports. This "symbolic annihilation" of women's sports distances women from athleticism and reinforces perceptions of categorical and hierarchical gender difference (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015; Duncan and Hasbrook 2002; Messner 2002; Tuchman 2000).

However, the qualitative mechanisms through which sports media marginalizes women have shifted over time. Fifteen to twenty-five years ago, the dominant framework coupled high production values and celebratory delivery of men's sports with cursory, low production values and overtly sexist commentary about women. Ten years ago, we observed a decline in overtly sexist and insulting commentary about women. Instead, the ascendant mode framed women athletes ambivalently, focusing in part on their athletic accomplishments while discussing their conventionally heterofeminine roles as wives, mothers, or girlfriends. Yet in this most recent iteration of our study, women athletes and women's sports were depicted

in a lackluster, matter-of-fact manner. Rather than being insulting or ambivalent, most women's sports coverage lacked the action-packed, humorous language, lavish compliments, and dominant descriptors routinely found in men's sports commentary.

When taken at face value, the shift away from degrading and objectifying coverage may seem positive. Gender inequalities in sport are no longer upheld through the outright exclusion of women (Messner 2002, 2009), medicalized discourses regarding female frailty (Hargreaves 2014), or fears regarding the masculinizing effects of competitive athletics on women (Cahn 1994). Nor do journalists and commentators overtly trivialize or sexualize female athletes, women's sports, and women's sports fans as often as they once did (Messner, Duncan, and Cooky 2003). These overt forms of sexism are now less culturally accepted (Kane and Maxwell 2011), and can result in sports journalists being fired from their positions (Cooky et al. 2010; Gibson 2011). Social media also has provided a powerful outlet for resistance to overt sexism in media coverage of women's sports, as was illustrated in the response on Twitter to the numerous examples of sexist coverage of the 2016 summer Olympic Games (Cooky 2017).

Despite the decline in overt sexism, women's and men's sports coverage is neither synonymous nor symmetrical. Similar to the way that whites now express racist views in color-blind ways (Bonilla-Silva 2006), the "respectful" coverage of women athletes is a new framework through which sports news and highlight shows normalize beliefs about men's athletic superiority. Currently, the structural and institutional arrangements by which gender is constituted and made salient in sport intersect with broader postfeminist ideologies to mark women athletes as inferior via assessments of individual athletes' and teams' accomplishments. This form of sexism, which we call "gender-bland sexism," enables sports news and highlight shows to convey sexist beliefs by discussing men's sports with more excitement, engagement, and reverence, while women's sports are rendered insignificant and inferior through lackluster commentary. This semantic move continues the aggressive and celebratory audience-building for central men's sports while simultaneously shielding televised sports news and highlights shows from charges of sexism. After all, now commentators are speaking respectfully about women, even if this means delivering the facts in a monotone and with an uninspired delivery. Consequently, gender-bland sexism subtly marginalizes and trivializes women's sports in ways that are difficult to detect.

A common perception in the sports industry is that audiences, viewers, and fans are inherently not interested in women's sports (Hardin et al.

2013), and gender-bland sexism reflects and reinforces this postfeminist sensibility. Gender-bland sexism explains the lack of coverage of women's sports and the poor quality of coverage not as sexism on the part of (mostly male) sports commentators but in terms of the market-based logics of supply and demand (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 2012; Gill 2016). The presumed lack of interest in women's sports by fans and audiences appears to be a rational response to women's "naturally" lackluster performances (which are constructed as such through sports media). Sports commentators are simply "giving viewers what they want," and what viewers want is to be entertained. This ignores the growing interest in women's sports among spectators and fans (Antunovic and Linden 2015). It also lets sports media off the hook from investing more time, resources, and energy into covering women's sports with the same degree of interest, quality and production values as they do when covering men's sports. Ultimately, the continued belief that women's sports are less interesting may limit television ratings, ticket sales, the amount advertisers are willing to pay for broadcast time during women's events, the potential for corporate endorsements for women athletes, and the salaries of players and coaches.

Given that many blue-collar jobs and occupations remain almost as sex segregated as they were in the 1950s (England 2010), gender-bland sexism also may operate in settings where high value is placed on characteristics such as large body size, physical strength, aggression, or violence. As organizations have institutionalized anti-sexual harassment trainings and human resources departments to ward against discrimination (Dobbin 2009), women may be marginalized via bland and respectful assessments of their abilities. For example, male supervisors or workers might use agentic language, lavish compliments, or dominant descriptors when describing other men's performances or capabilities but keep their evaluations of women's performances straightforward and boring. These differential types of assessments may play a key role in subtly perpetuating beliefs that uphold the gendered division of labor, such as the assumption that men are "naturally" stronger or more skilled at tasks involving physical labor (Schilt 2010).

Furthermore, considering that women continue to be underrepresented within positions of power and authority within the workforce (Charles and Grusky 2004; England 2010), gender-bland sexism may also structure gender relations within professional workplaces. For example, in their analysis of letters of recommendation for medical faculty, Trix and Psenka (2003) found that letters written for women faculty members were shorter

than those written for men and often lacked substantive commentary regarding their skills, training, and accomplishments. Gender-bland sexism damns women's accomplishments with faint praise, mobilizing perceptions of merit and worth to perpetuate and legitimate gender inequality in the workforce while simultaneously obfuscating the processes undergirding these forces.

Akin to color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 2015), gender-bland sexism provides a framework that structures how we think, see, and feel about women. As girls and women have moved into historically male-dominated, male-controlled institutions such as sport, gender-bland sexism superficially extends the tenets of equal opportunity and liberalism to women athletes in a way that perpetuates and legitimizes structured gender inequalities. Within a post-Title IX¹ moment, in which feminism has ostensibly leveled the playing field for girls and women athletes, gender-bland sexism renders women's athletic accomplishments less impressive and less interesting than men's. When compared to the overt forms of sexism in past televised sports news, today's gender-bland sexism makes the unequal status quo in sport even more difficult to see, and thus to challenge. Gender-bland sexism is thus a form of stealth sexism. It operates under the radar to reify gender boundaries and render invisible the very real and continued need to address persisting inequalities, thus presenting a fictitious view of gender that is both subtle and difficult to contest.

NOTE

1. Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 is a federal law in the United States that states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

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