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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

It has been 30 years since Title IX legislation granted women equal playing time, but the male-dominated world of sports journalism has yet to catch up with the law. Coverage of women's sports lags far behind men's and focuses on female athletes' femininity and sexuality over their achievements on the court and field. While female athleticism challenges gender norms, women athletes continue to be depicted in traditional roles that reaffirm their femininity - as wives and mothers or sex objects. By comparison, male athletes are framed according to heroic masculine ideals that honor courage, strength, and endurance. (Playing Unfair, 2002)

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Val Hanson

It has been 30 years since Title IX legislation granted women equal playing time, but the male-dominated world of sports journalism has yet to catch up with the law. Coverage of women's sports lags far behind men's and focuses on female athletes' femininity and sexuality over their achievements on the court and field. While female athleticism challenges gender norms, women athletes continue to be depicted in traditional roles that reaffirm their femininity – as wives and mothers or sex objects. By comparison, male athletes are framed according to heroic masculine ideals that honor courage, strength, and endurance. (Playing Unfair, 2002)

Although women are equal to men under the law, they are not equal in the world of sports. Women can vote, be CEOs of a Fortune 500 company, or be collegiate and professional athletes, just like any man. Women can do almost anything that men can do, but the way they are viewed within the athletics world does not match their actual abilities. The light in which women are portrayed is vastly dimmer than the one shining upon men in professional and collegiate sports, even though women's sports are required to be as easily accessible and as equally funded as men's in collegiate athletics due to Title IX legislation.

Sex appeal, rather than recognition of athletic accomplishments, is prevalent. A woman's body is not portrayed as a strong, muscular machine capable of extraordinary athletic feats like a man's body is, but instead is seen more as an object pleasurable to the eye when it is exposed outside of the realm of sports. When men see these objectified images, they do not look at a female athlete as an athlete; instead, they see a caretaker, a keeper of the household, a wife, mother, and most often, a sex object. The caretaker image stems from television and media-generated stereotypes that have formed over time through the presentation of women cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the household, essentially making life easier for their men and families. Female bodies are exploited through bikini photo shoots rather than through competitive action shots in uniform as men are portrayed. Tennis stars such as Venus and Serena Williams provide one example. Their career accomplishments include numerous Grand Slam tournament wins, both having

been ranked as the #1 player in the world on at least one occasion each, and they will undoubtedly go down as two of the greatest tennis players, regardless of gender, of all time. Even with their impressive tennis résumés, telecasts and news reports largely focus on the outfits the Williams' choose to wear, instead of athletic aspects, while pointing out provocative aspects of the clothing. Granted, these women make the decision to wear the questionable outfits, but media outlets are not required to report on the fashion of the game, instead they are *choosing* to do so. This type of coverage is evidence of how women in sports are represented through the media. Although it is not always the truth, women's athletic abilities seem to be considered far inferior and their competition less intense than any man's, apparent through the lack of media and commercialization efforts directed toward the benefit of the female gender. Therefore, the amount of media coverage and airtime given to males compared to females is a ratio heavily favoring men. Women have come a long way in the sports world, especially since Title IX was implemented in 1972, but their abilities and accomplishments continue to be overlooked by male sports reporters in particular, who see a woman's primary role as caretaker and sex symbol, thus giving women credit and exposure mainly for their sex appeal, which creates an image of inferiority compared to male athletes. The most prestigious championship in the world of women's soccer provided a platform where this type of portrayal could be propagated on an international scene.

The everlasting image of the entire 1999 Women's World Cup remains to be when female soccer player Brandi Chastain ripped her jersey off, revealing her sports bra in elation after scoring the World Cup-clinching penalty kick. In the real scope of the happening, it was a harmless act that was not meant to be interpreted in a sexual way; it was just a reaction to a defining moment in her life and in the larger scope of women's sports, as well as the popularity of soccer as an American sport. But this innocent action sparked a media craze and influenced an even larger movement to expose female athletes in the sexual light that has become commonplace today. Although Chastain did agree to do a photo shoot following the hype of the World Cup championship, fully aware that she would not be entirely clothed, she did it with the intention of gaining popularity for her gender in the sporting

world. The bigger issue is that many media outlets did not want to portray her or the rest of her teammates after their historic win as accomplished athletes in uniform who overcame adversity and triumphed on the world's stage with determination and athletic talent, but instead displayed them as sex objects.

Thinking the opportunity would bring positive publicity to female athletes and soccer alike, Chastain was surprised at how contrary the results were to her expectations. After pondering the lasting effects of her decision to appear in such a light, "indeed, Chastain would come to regret how her pictures were used in *Gear [Magazine]*... 'I did it one time, for the right reason. If I had known what kind of magazine it was, I wouldn't have done it'" (Longman 40). Even though it was a personal decision to agree to the shoot, Chastain's femininity was exploited for sexual and commercial use. Her commendable intentions to further the positive exposure for all female athletes backfired into negative manipulation. Donna de Varona, a 1964 Olympic swimming champion, feels uneasy that women are forced to defend their athleticism by projecting their feminine side and can't simply be who they are to gain credit for their numerous extraordinary feats. She sums it up perfectly when she argues, "we always have to prove that we're feminine and sexy. We can be tough and sweaty and a sex symbol; if we do that, we're acceptable. Michael Jordan didn't have to take off his clothes" (39). Male sport journalists, sadly, have made it the norm to show off women in a sexual light, which does not at all represent the true image of a female athlete.

This shift to the sexual exposure of female athletes is never more evident or exemplified than by the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. *Sports Illustrated* has long been known for its exemplary sports writing and its vivid images of athletes (mostly men) in action. It is a sports magazine through and through, and not intended to be of the *Playboy* nature, at least not until the issue with the half-naked women was officially introduced in 1964. Although professional models traditionally adorn the cover, there are also a few female athletes featured throughout, not on the playing field or the court, but often in an exotic location with little to no clothing on. If a person did not know who the athletes were or the magazine did not provide clarifying captions, readers would probably not know that some of the

women are athletes because they are in no way portrayed as such. *The Swimsuit Issue and Sport* by Laurel R. Davis, presents both sides to the argument addressed pertaining to the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue in an unbiased representation. On one side of the argument, many would contend that a majority of consumers who purchase and read the magazine are men due to their extreme passion for sports, and thus the magazine should be directed more toward the male gender, exactly the reason why scantily-clad women adorn the entire magazine for one issue out of a subscription year. Magazine editors would argue that it is perfectly acceptable to represent women in this light, explaining that it is an aspect that men enjoy. However, the issue remains that *Sports Illustrated* is a sports magazine, just as its title indicates. According to dictionary.com, sport is defined as "an athletic activity requiring skill or physical prowess and often of a competitive nature, as racing, baseball, tennis, golf, bowling, wrestling, boxing, hunting, fishing." Therefore, modeling is not a sport and the problem is that a majority of the women depicted in the annual issue are not even athletes.

Some consumers claim that Sports Illustrated is sexist because it does not treat [heterosexual] women consumers in the same manner as [heterosexual] men consumers. These consumers maintain that when producers picture only female models in the swimsuit issue, they provide [heterosexual] men consumers with sexual representation that they enjoy while neglecting to offer [heterosexual] women consumers the same form of enjoyment. (Davis 69)

In other words, women are exploited to a far greater extent than men. Both sides of this controversy show that women are treated unequally, inferior to men through both representation and sexual portrayal. There is no such issue as "Female Athlete Accomplishments" illustrating the athletic achievements or abilities of women or even one such as "Athletes in Action," which would have a pictorial showcase of both male and female athletes in uniform, showing the real model of an athlete in their respective venues of play. Although there are sport magazines dedicated specifically to women, such as *Women's Basketball*, for example, there are also magazines solely dedicated to men as well. The problem that *Sports Illustrated* presents is that there

is no "men" or "men's sports" in its title, implying that its content will include both men *and* women. If it is just going to feature men, then it should specify that, and when women are featured, it should not be sexually related. It is sad that what is supposed to be a sports magazine, a highly-circulated and consumed media product, makes a profit from the sexual exploitation of women. Unfortunately, within the mindset of male sports journalists lies the famous saying, "sex sells."

Mainstream media as a whole, not only magazines, largely ignores women, their athletic abilities, and the essence of the tough and talented female athlete. While some women such as Brandi Chastain and the Williams sisters put themselves at risk for manipulation with their own personal decisions, a large number are the victims of misrepresentation. *Playing Unfair*, a documentary film specifically focusing on the media representation of women in sports, presents professors from various prestigious universities and organizations, who express their concern with how female sports and athletes alike are represented in a negative light, and not given the deserved attention that shows the true image of an athlete. Their opinions emphasize the sexual exposure that almost completely defines how successful and popular a female can become. Mary Jo Kane, a professor at the University of Minnesota, bluntly tells it like it is: "men own sport" (Alper). She also goes on to point out, "the empowerment of women is sexuality."

With scientific evidence indicating that men are biologically programmed to be stronger and faster, coverage of their sports is considered to be more entertaining, filled with greater excitement and action. Women are pushed to the rear of the limelight, hardly spotlighted at all. Tennis player Anna Kournikova is a perfect example of how sexuality, not athletic ability, gives female athletes their desired media coverage, but in a negative light. Throughout her career, Kournikova never won a singles title in tennis, but she made an astounding \$10-15 million in endorsements through modeling and exposing herself to the camera, using her attractiveness to make money and gain attention. Modeling and photo shoots rather than actual sports are what female athletes seem to be defined by. When it comes to the mainstream sporting news sources such as ESPN and *Sports Illustrated*, Michael Messner, a professor at the University of Southern California, plainly emphasizes that, "there's no

women's sports happening." In fact, women make up 40% of all sports participation, a figure close to half. In 1989, female sports represented 3-5% of all sporting media coverage (Alper). Ten years later in 1999, that figure only rose to 8%, even after the revolutionary Women's World Cup (Alper). Women did not even constitute a tenth of media coverage in sports, even though they represented almost half of all participation. In more recent analysis indicating the large gap between mainstream male and female sports media coverage relating to television, a study revealed that "an examination of ESPN's SportsCenter in both 1999 and 2004 depicted that the show devoted only two percent of its air time to women's sports. In 2004, Fox Sports' Southern California Sports Report devoted only three percent of air time to women's sports" (Women's Sports Foundation 26). SportsCenter also includes disproportionate ratios in the number of stories it runs for each gender, as the research describes:

During a 30-day analysis of ESPN's "SportsCenter" (May 25 through June 23, 2002), ESPN ran 778 stories about males, 16 about females and 13 that mentioned both males and females. The ratio was more than 48 to one [favoring men]. The study also revealed that no stories featuring only women were aired in the first two segments of SportsCenter. (Women's Sports Foundation 26)

Women account for a large percentage of the sporting world, but it is disheartening and discouraging to thousands of female athletes that they account for only a mere fraction of its media coverage. Pat Griffin, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, attributes some of this disproportionate statistical information to the fact that "decisions [are] made by men" and that there is "a lot of cultural anxiety about women" (*Playing Unfair*). These decisions, made by men, include how much and what kind of media coverage should be given to female athletes and women's sports, decisions that are largely influenced by male sports reporters. Women athletes who do not expose themselves sexually, Mary Jo Kane of the University of Minnesota explains, appear to the public with characteristics such as, "power and strength [which mean] butch" (Alper). A woman who is athletically talented and doesn't show herself off in a sexual manner represents a "butch" woman, a manly woman for lack of a better phrase. The summer of

1999, although a turning point for women in sports, also provided a spotlight where these feelings could be perpetuated and exaggerated.

The U.S. Women's National Soccer team's victory in the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup on U.S. soil proved to be a turning point for women in sports, but it also vividly displayed the lack of media attention for women and how women are truly viewed in that venue of athletics. As described in *The Girls of Summer* by Jere Longman, their journey stood for much more than just a simple women's soccer tournament. Longman bluntly admits that "while the public acceptance of female athletes has never been greater, gusts of homophobia persist like tropical flurries from vestigial hurricanes" (Longman 41). Just because women play competitive, contact sports with other women does not automatically mean that all female athletes are homosexuals, but unfortunately this is the mindset of a large portion of men. It is a projected identity that is just not true. There are some female athletes who are open about their sexual orientation, such as tennis players Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova, admitting that they are in same-sex relationships, but the projection that these few open women represent all female athletes as homosexuals is unfair to the entire gender. Since male athletes are exactly like women in that they play competitive, contact sports with people of the same sex, there should be the same ridicule for each gender or none at all. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Male athletes are not automatically considered homosexual when they play sports. Although women in sports are becoming more accepted, their reputation does not reflect the true majority; sexuality projections degrade the image of the female athlete. Although more media coverage of women's sports was garnered, women are now more exploited in photography and media coverage through a highly sexual manner.

No matter what a female athlete looks like, how she acts, or who she is as a person, there are some amazingly talented women in sports. With such a large gender gap in credible, non-sexual, sport media coverage, Kane pleads, "Turn the camera on us, we're terrific athletes" (Alper). To be regarded credibly as true athletes, women must be given a proportionate amount of media coverage compared to men. They need coverage that does not portray them in a sexual light.

Gender inequality in sports not only exists in professional athletics; it is just as prevalent in the

collegiate realm as well. Although 1972 brought a revolutionary change in collegiate athletics by requiring an equal amount of funding and participation opportunities available for women as men with Title IX, the inequality extends much farther into the media coverage and portrayal of the student-athlete. *Constructions of Gender in Sport: An Analysis of Intercollegiate Media Guide Cover Photographs*, by Jo Ann M. Buysse and Melissa Sheridan Embser-Herbert, takes the larger issues of the misrepresentation and gender inequality affecting women in sports and applies them to the more specific focus of how media guides—small booklets that introduce players, records, historical statistics, and other relevant information connected to a sports team—in college athletics portray their female athletes compared to their male counterparts:

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I intercollegiate media guides are representative of a powerful, highly prestigious, and influential sector of organized sport participation. They are the primary means by which colleges and universities market their athletic teams to the press, advertisers, and corporate sponsors as well as alumni, donors, and other campus and community members who read them. Unlike many game programs, the media guides tend to be thicker, slicker portrayals of the images the institution wishes to present about itself and its athletes. (Buysse 67)

The article aims to exemplify how women are portrayed in a negative, more sexual manner, almost unrelated to athletics, while men are shown in powerful settings that reflect their strength and athletic abilities. To support their standings on the issue, the authors argue:

Male athletes are portrayed by the popular media in terms of their physicality, muscularity, and superiority, while female athletes are feminized and their achievements as athletes are often trivialized. The issue of difference is highlighted by the fact that in media coverage, girls and women may be athletes, but they are female first. The physical attractiveness of these athletes is often emphasized over their athletic abilities. (Buysse 68)

This quote encompasses the entire issue of gender inequity through media coverage in sport in a few simple sentences. The data compiled reflects the differences in significant aspects of sport that portray gender inequality such as setting, uniform, and pose. Regarding whether or not athletes were photographed on the playing surface of their respective sports:

In 1990, results indicated that there was a significant difference between gender of the athlete and court location. Men were portrayed on the court 68 percent of the time compared to 51 percent of the time for women athletes. Seven years later, the relationship remained significant. Men were portrayed on the court 57 percent of the time, while women athletes were on the court 41 percent of the time. Although this represents a decrease for both genders, men are still portrayed on the playing surface significantly more often than are women. (Buysse 71)

Through the aspect of where athletes are photographed, the way athletes are depicted is revealed. On one hand, with men on the playing surface more often, they are portrayed as the more athletic gender. On the other hand, with women pictured off the playing surface more often, it is a sly and deceitful representation of how women are truly seen in athletics, as the sexy, feminine caretaker. It is as if those who portray women outside of the athletic venue do not believe they are worthy of being seen as athletic figures. The settings in which athletes are posed and pictured have a lot to do with that mindset. Accordingly, the study then took a closer look at portrayal in uniform, attempting to find a correlation between what athletes were wearing in photographs and their genders. The research found that, "with respect to uniform presence, initial findings revealed that more male athletes were featured in their uniforms (93 percent) than were female athletes (84 percent)" (71). This finding supports the argument that women are represented in a more sexual light than men and much less as accomplished athletes. When it came to how athletes were posed, the study found that:

In 1990, results indicated a significant difference, as men were found to be in action 59 percent of the time compared to 43 percent for women. In the replication [of the study in 1997], this relationship

remained significant, with 62 percent of men seen in action and 41 percent of women seen in action. (Buysse 71)

This data represents one more facet in which female athletes are predisposed and subject to representation in a more "homemaker" setting with more stereotypical characteristics common to the female gender, not including athletic traits. As a concluding statement of the study, the authors tell it bluntly that "the above results suggest that if we want to predict how athleticism is portrayed in Division I intercollegiate sports, we need only know the gender of the athlete" (78). Images of male and female athletes have become engrained into minds so that one only needs to know an athlete's gender in order to know how good of an athlete they are, with the assumption that females are much less athletic than males. Being a student-athlete in college is made out to be one of the greatest opportunities within one's lifetime no matter what gender, if one is given the opportunity. Under closer inspection, the light under which female student-athletes are cast leaves no shadow of equality.

Men are portrayed as bigger, faster, stronger, and overall superior to women in college sports as well as professional, projecting men as the stereotypical images of athletic icons. Conversely, stereotypical femininity, like the feminine caretaker, represents the image of the female athlete. These representations further solidify the dominance, power, and control that males exert in the realm of sport. The commercialization of sport and increased media coverage has diminished the importance and prominence of females in sport. Women have come a long way in sports over the past few decades, but gender has become the aspect of identity within sports that encompasses not only the terms male and female, but also athlete and participant, respectively.

Women face many struggles in the fight to become equals on the playing field with men in more ways than one. Females must not only overcome the gender inequalities and stereotypes projected upon their identities, but must also maintain sufficient levels of confidence and support, which can sometimes be suppressed as a result of their inferior position in sports. Female athletes lack being seen for whom they really are, and their abilities and accomplishments are masked by stereotypical attitudes. Leslie Heywood, a professional weightlifter and professor of English

and Creative Writing at Binghamton University, provides a prime first-hand example of this. As a female athlete in the 1970s, times were of course very different for Heywood than what they are now as Title IX has been fully implemented, in addition to many new opportunities that women have available. The problem is, even today, women are not equal. In her autobiography, *Pretty Good for a Girl*, Heywood tells her life story of struggle as a female runner in the male-dominated sporting world. Leslie Heywood implores that, "we need to make sure girls are treated as athletes, not just pretty girls. We need to continue the research that's been started on all the aspects of girls' and women's lives, which shows sports' potential to give us a sense of competence and power" (Heywood 218). The day where female athletes are paid as much positive, non-sexist attention as is paid to male athletes has not yet been witnessed, which means there is still work to be done to empower those girls and women who aspire to play sports, no matter what level. Heywood describes the problem:

There are many such environments, but as my own story and the stories of many other athletes show, women sometimes compete under conditions that do not always offer them respect or put them on a level playing field with their male peers. Research shows that problems within athletic culture like sexual harassment, overtraining, eating disorders, and inequitable resources and treatment are still part of the experiences of many women athletes. The U.S. women's soccer team, for instance, receives much less money for its victories than does the men's team, which is ranked much lower and enjoys much less popularity and name recognition. Some coaches still encourage their [female] athletes to lose weight in order to perform better, subjecting them to public taunting about their bodies and appearances. And coaches are still forming unethical sexual relationships with their athletes, turning what is a professional relationship characterized by an unequal distribution of power into an illusion of romance.

(Heywood xiii)

Female athletes may win more championships, more gold medals, have more wins, and even have more popularity within their respective sports, but none of

these accomplishments will give them proper recognition, let alone a higher standing than men. Women will not have as tough of competition, their rules would be easier, their sports won't require as much skill, or one of the many other excuses made up to disregard their prowess. The future for female athletes can be bright, but there is much work to do to raise the recognition of these athletes, recognition in a more non-sexual light, as well as closing the gender equality gap to bring each gender on a more equal level.

Although there is a large amount of evidence and research to support the inequality of men and women in sports, with the lack of media coverage for female athletes, and their sexual exploitation in the small amount of coverage they do get, there is no denying that women have come a long way in sports, especially over the past few decades. Their recognition may even be higher than ever. Female athletes were in an even worse, helpless position before 1972 when Title IX forced all higher institutions to provide an equal number of sports and funding available for women as there was for men. Female sports participation is now higher than it has ever been, with over 2.25 million participants in interscholastic athletics alone, a number up from 300,000 in 1972 (Heywood 219). There are more professional women's sports leagues and teams than ever before with the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) enjoying a fair amount of success, as well as the newer Women's Professional Soccer league (WPS). There is even a respectable number of female sports broadcasters on ESPN's "SportsCenter." They may not be athletes themselves, but they give women more stature in sports than do the male broadcasters because women can be seen in an important role at the front and center of a popular sports venue, bringing sporting news to millions of television viewers. Another one of these places that women were seen by millions in a sporting venue was the 1999 Women's World Cup, which represents the ultimate time for women's sports. Heywood put the large scope of the event into her own words:

*While once female athletes were dismissed as 'not serious' or 'too masculine,' or were disparagingly referred to as 'dykes,' the summer of 1999 found a nation captivated by a women's soccer team – so captivated, in fact, that the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, *Newsweek*, *People*, and *Time**

were simultaneously graced by stunning images of the athletes from their Women's World Cup victory. The Saturday afternoon of the match garnered major network coverage and Nielsen ratings higher than those for NBA finals. Those of us unfortunate enough to be watching from home saw the unprecedented spectacle of a sold-out Rose Bowl and a rowdily mixed crowd of all ages, genders, and races, 91,000 strong, giving it up for the girls, screaming their lungs out in support of not football or basketball players but female athletes, women. (Heywood ix-x)

This event became the climax and the turning point for women's sports and female athletes alike. It showed that women could actually be skilled, accomplished, championship athletes, and could even be entertaining to watch, even though sexual exploitation like in the case of Brandi Chastain, as well as continued projections of homosexuality, persisted. The possibilities are truly endless for where women and their sports can go in the future; they just need to be paid more attention to, in an appropriate manner.

It is a tragedy that women are not given more sincere consideration and attention for their pure talent in sports. Women have so much to offer, but male sports reporters within mainstream media automatically write them off with the excuse that they aren't as entertaining as men, and not capable of doing as much. Female athletes bring so much more than sexuality to the playing surface. On many occasions, it is more enjoyable to watch women play any sport compared to the men because men take their superiority to their heads, showing off with their fancy moves and slam dunks, while the women play the game with its fundamental roots as it was designed to be played, without the arrogant showboating all of the time.

Their strength and determination is undeniable in that many women are able and willing to bear children and come back to play and dominate their respective sports, women such as Joy Fawcett of the U.S. Women's National Soccer team and Lisa Leslie of the Los Angeles Sparks WNBA squad and USA basketball. Women can be and are caretakers, keepers of the household, wives, and mothers, but that does not have to be their only job and image. These same women are some of the greatest athletes the world has ever seen. The sexual

exploitation of these women, and countless others, can also have devastating effects on female athletes, young and old, who watch every move of these role models. The pressure to live up to the sexuality and perfect bodies that are so prevalently portrayed and accepted as the norm influences young teenage female athletes to manipulate themselves to live up to this expectation, adopting the mindset that it is the only way they will be successful in the sports world.

Sports can provide so many valuable lessons to young athletes, female and male alike. They teach the lifelong lessons of teamwork and being able to work cooperatively with others, discipline, and time management, among so many other positive effects. Sports, for many athletes, also serve as a source of pure happiness, a place of relaxation and an escape from the rigors of everyday life and reality, which can be grim. To ensure this is what young athletes, especially females, are getting out of sports instead of the negative pressures and effects, research and advocates must continue to advance the position and reputation of women in sports, to shift the focus from their sexuality to their raw talent and sporting prowess, and to change gender equality in sports from a dream to reality.

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