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### ESPN's Hovering Influence on Women's Athletics

#### **Introduction:**

Women's athletics are increasing in popularity in each sport category across the nation. Although women's athletics are not exactly booming, media coverage on them is lagging even further behind. Several studies over the past decade have discovered staggering statistics on big name sports broadcast networks and the time they devote to female sports. For instance, ESPN has been exposed time and time again for their lack of reporting on female athletics. Several studies have been conducted on ESPN's hour long show SportsCenter, and the statistics are lopsided with women averaging 1.92 minutes of airtime (Martin 18). This pales in comparison to time given to men. ESPN's news stories were also examined during the Australian Open and out of the total 2,155 stories, 443 covered female athletes (Coche 3). Again, a fraction of stories covered compared to male athletes. There is a significant amount of research that has been done on ESPN's television exposure, magazine articles, news stories, and highlights that have influenced and resulted in female athletics being kept to a bare minimum. Other factors and influences that impact men and women competitive sports are marketing, promotion, and predisposition.

To date, however, no applicable research has been conducted to determine if the amount of airtime women's athletics receive, along with the size of their fan base, have a direct

correlation with the influences that ESPN places on the sports world. Even though the exposure of women sports is obviously insignificant compared to men's, there has been no studies conducted to actually determine if ESPN's influence is responsible for female sports low in game attendance, nor accountable for the insignificant amount of fans these female athletes have. This research paper was proposed to discover if ESPN has an overall effect on women athletics pertaining to the amount of views their events receive, both on television and in person, including if ESPN has any sort of influence on the volume of women's sports overall fan base.

### **ESPN's SportsCenter Segment**

Female athletics have been growing at a rapid rate, and show no signs of slowing down. Women made up forty-five percent of the Rio 2016 Olympian athletes, which broke the previous record of forty-four percent in the London 2012 Olympic games. (Warner 2016). That is an outstanding figure considering female athletes were not allowed to compete until the Olympic games in France 1900, where only twenty-two females competed. Women now compete in almost every sport worldwide that men have dominated for so long, yet the media coverage hasn't changed a bit. The amount of time ESPN devotes to these female athletes is staggering compared to the male athletes, especially considering that women sports have grown immensely throughout the 1900's in an attempt to grasp equality. ESPN has a very well-known, hour long television broadcast called SportsCenter. Tywan G. Martin conducted a week long study on SportsCenter's 11:00pm broadcast and discovered, "the mean of men's sports coverage time on ESPN's SportCenter was 40.55 minutes and the mean of women's coverage

time on ESPN's SportCenter was 1.92 minutes" (18). That is a significant difference in time devoted to these female athletes, considering male and female sports have the same amount of games during the same time period. ESPN is influencing its spectators who view their 11:00pm SportsCenter broadcast that men's sports are more important superior than women's sports, just by how much time they devote to each segment. By throwing up a quick two minute segment to cover female athletics, ESPN is influencing its viewers that female athletics must not be as entertaining or exciting as male athletes who take up the rest of the hour long program.

### **Australian Open 2016**

ESPN's slogan is "The Worldwide Leader in Sports", and they cover the biggest sporting events around the world. One of these yearly events that ESPN puts a lot of time, effort and resources into covering is known as the Australian Open, a massive tennis tournament held annually in Melbourne, Australia. It features men's and women's singles, along with men's, women's, and mixed doubles throughout the length of the tournament. Roxanne Coche and several of her colleagues decided to conduct a study on ESPN's news stories and coverage of the 2012 Australian Open. Her results yielded, "Among the 2,155 stories, 1,558 (72%) were about men's tennis and only 443 (20%) were about women's tennis. The remaining 7% were stories that either included both genders or were about the sport of tennis in general (Coche 79). This gender difference is significant considering that both men and women tennis athletes played roughly the same number of matches, the only difference is that the female tennis athletes play the best of three sets, while the men play the best of five sets. By ESPN reporting

72% on male tennis they are influencing tennis fans and sports fans around the globe that female tennis is inferior and overall not as significant. Although, ESPN does thoroughly report on the Williams' sisters because they are the best female tennis players of this decade, there are several other female athletes that are very talented, but will never get credit because male tennis players are taking up the majority of news reports. With ESPN promoting and reporting on predominantly men's tennis during the Australian Open, they are influencing their viewers worldwide that the men's tennis matches are worthier of highlighting or recapping, and therefore must have been more exciting than the women's tennis matches.

### **Media Framing and Word Choice**

Women are now able to compete in every sport that men compete in, from mixed martial arts to golf, they train and perform at a high level the same way men do. They practice daily and put the necessary work in to be successful at the end of the day, yet their hard work and achievements are not valued like the men. Instead of achievements and accomplishments being recognized, it's more about the look and shape of their body, along with who they are dating at the time. The media frames female athletes in a way that makes people more aware of their weaknesses and love life, rather than their actual occupation as a professional athlete. "Four emergent themes commonly applied to women in sports: mental weakness, male reference, motherhood and sisterhood, and celebrity" (Nicely 2). Stacey Nicely was able to apply these four themes to practically every televised news story reporting on female athletes. Not only do these female athletes receive little television exposure overall, but the exposure they do receive is more about Nicely's four themes rather than their achievements on the

field/court. The most concerning aspect of the media framing these female athletes is that oftentimes, the audience is oblivious that the media define and frame the issues and information they are exposed to, which amplifies the power and influence the media have over the generally uninformed public (Reber & Berger, 2005). This goes to show that ESPN can influence its viewers and audience without them ever realizing it, or comprehending that what they are watching is influential in general. This gives ESPN the opportunity to influence its viewers' opinions, thoughts, and overall beliefs pertaining to female athletics.

Not only does ESPN frame female athletes on televised news reports, but they also have been blameworthy of poor word choice used by commentators analyzing a female game. ESPN's commentators have been known to have a gender bias in the language used when speaking of female athletes compared to male athletes. For instance, "commentators often used words like big, strong, brilliant, gutsy and aggressive to describe men, while tending to save weary, fatigued, frustrated, panicked, vulnerable and choking for women" (Duncan 12). While ESPN has greatly improved on careful word choice to avoid these adjectives from being used by commentators when analyzing a women's game, they still seem to slip out here and there. As ESPN progresses with better use of word choice, they still fall back on how they address female athletes. In the tennis and basketball games studied by Duncan, "women were referred to as girls, as well as young ladies. Men, however, were never referred to as boys, but as men, young men or young fellas" (12). Word choice has a vast impact on the subject matter and can therefore influence the audience to feel a certain way depending on the intention of the speaker. With ESPN using certain words like vulnerable or weary to describe female athletes during a game, it will then have a direct influence on the spectators' thoughts on that

particular athlete whether she is truly vulnerable or not; The viewer may believe she is vulnerable and weary just because of the commentators' word choice.

Along with word choice, the way commentators refer to these female athletes also has an influence on the audience. By referring to these female athletes as girls or young ladies, ESPN's commentators are influencing the audience into thinking of these athletes as young girls playing a game, rather than referring to them as women playing a professional sport. Sport's fans and spectators want to watch strong and brilliant athletes make great plays, not vulnerable and weary athletes choking in big time situations. Therefore, by commentators using this type of influential word choice about female athletes, less sports fans are going to want to watch or tune in to the broadcast.

### **Female Sports Fans Opinion on Female Athletics**

Although ESPN is very lopsided in balancing the amount of television exposure, news reports, and highlights given to female and male athletes, there are several other factors that have an influence on female athletics as well. One of these factors is the preference of sports fans and what they want to watch when they tune in to ESPN. Women's athletics are gaining popularity with sports fans, but it's a very slow moving process. While sports fans are becoming more interested in female sports, there is still a fine line between fans who follow and engage in female sports versus fans who can name a couple big time female athletes, but nothing more. There have been several studies to determine the reason that female athletics haven't caught on with most sports fans in the way male sports have since sports were invented. Annemarie Farrell, conducted an interesting study to determine the reason that

female sports fans who are highly involved in male athletics, don't support female athletics in the same manner. Farrell, studied twelve women all from different backgrounds and each interview lasted between forty and sixty minutes. Her overall findings were, "as echoed in these women's experiences and words, male sports were deemed the only important type of sport worthy of consumption. These sentiments were clearly learned through a lifetime of consumption patterns that exclusively prioritized men's sport at the systematic exclusion of the consumption of women's sport" (Farrell 194). In other words, these women showed signals that throughout their lives, they had been conditioned into believing that male athletics should be and will always be prioritized over female sports. Thus, female athletics have had a difficult time trying to increase its fan base simply because women spectators feel that men sports are more important and feel as if women sports are inferior because of this consumption pattern learned over the course of their lives. If females already feel that watching sport means watching men's sport and talking about sport means discussing men's athletic events (Farrell 195), then ESPN further influences that ideology by emphasizing and promoting male sport consumption on a much larger scale. Therefore, by ESPN prioritizing men sport, they are broadening these females' already conditioned thoughts about men sports and influencing them to truly believe that female athletics are far less important. Consequently, this effects the fan base of these female athletes and is the reason in-game attendance, along with viewers at home is so truncated.

## **The Effect of Marketing and Promotion**

Marketing and promotion also have a large impact on female athletics in determining why their fan base is substantially low. Marketing is the action or business of promoting and selling products or services. Marketing plays a sizeable role in both male and female athletics in trying to increase the team or leagues follower size. March Madness for example is collegiate basketball's biggest event of the year and earned a record breaking \$1.24 billion of national television ad spending in 2016 (Swallen 2017). To earn that much in ad revenue you must have sufficient funds to spend on marketing, this is where female athletics fall short. Female athletics as a whole, does not sell enough game tickets or team merchandise to cover promotion costs and therefore are unable to market their team in the same way that men athletics do. Not only does money play a significant role in marketing a team to new audiences, but overall team standing in conference plays a crucial part in the amount of exposure the team will receive. Meaning, the better the team played, the higher they ranked in their conference. Which in turn, the more attention and in game attendance the team received throughout that particular season. Lastly, single game specifics also have a looming effect on in game attendance. This involves aspects related to scheduling, such as game start time either evening or afternoon, rivalry with opponent, overall ranking of opponent, and at what point of the season (Martinson 48). This goes to show that there are several other factors that have a significant influence on female athletics' fan base and overall exposure, besides ESPN's Network.



## Sports Participants

Sports occur in most, if not all human societies around the world. It gives humans a chance to compete against one another and the ability to test our physical skills. Sports are a wonderful thing in human life, they may function as physical competitions for status, which differs from unrestrained combat or warfare because they reduce the risk of physical harm to competitors and more publicly and efficiently reveal the competitors' competitive qualities (Lombardo 12). Although sports are great, there is a gap that has yet to be filled between male and female sports. Males have been playing sports since as early as 6000 BC, and continue to dominate sport at a high level today. Females are now leveling the playing field and compete in almost every sport that males compete in today, yet there is a lack of female competitors and participants in sports compared to male competitors. The American Use Time Survey, interviewed 112,000 individuals regarding their activities during one day. Females accounted for 51% of exercise (i.e., non-competitive) participations, 24% of total sports participations, and 20% of team sports participations (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Robert O. Deaner conducted a gender based sports study and determined, "compared to girls and women, boys and men will, on average, have a far greater inborn motivational predisposition to participate in and monitor sports, especially sports involving combat-relevant skills and/or team play" (5). Therefore, boys on average, are born with a stronger motive to participate and compete in sports. The sex difference in the predisposition for physical competition has a major influence on female sports. If males are already born with a motive for competition that is greater than the motive of females, they will in fact have more sport participants than those of female athletics. This may have an influence on female desire to follow sports and may have a significant impact on

female sports fan base. Thus, ESPN has a large part in influencing female athletics, but have no control over the predisposition for physical competition.

### **Counter Arguments**

Finally, there are several counter arguments on ESPN's low television exposure and overall influence on female athletics. Time, is the principal argument when it comes to female sports. Female sports recently became regulated and encouraged compared to male sports, which have been practiced and encouraged for centuries. Title XI, was implemented in 1972 in the United States, a law stating that any federally funded program cannot discriminate anyone based on their sex. Although Title XI has been in place since 1972, it took at least twenty more years for schools and institutions to start actively practicing it. Thus, female sports have only been heavily encouraged for two decades. For example, the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) was started in 1996 compared to the NBA which was founded in 1946. That is a fifty-year difference and is the main argument that ESPN uses when discussing why women's sports are covered a fraction of the time men are. ESPN claims that women athletics are fairly new and still trying to catch on with sports fans around the globe.

Alongside time, low revenue is also a major argument when discussing ESPN's coverage and influence on women sports. ESPN claims that to keep their broadcast profitable and to deliver primetime coverage to its sports fans worldwide, it needs to continue to air its most demanded games and highlights. When observing a female sporting event on television, its noticeable that a lot of the stadium seats are vacant and that most of the fans at the game are in the lower section near the court/field. ESPN declares that it is the same way on television

with its viewers, meaning that they don't have enough viewers to consistently air and televise female sports without losing money.

## **Conclusion**

The amount of coverage on female athletics observed in ESPN's SportCenter and ESPN's broadcast are much lower than the coverage on male athletics. Sports fans and participants should be conscious of ESPN's influence on women sports and try to omit any of the remarks made that devalue female athletes. Support and encouragement of these female athletes will help them break through this divide between gender and sports. Women have struggled and pushed to get where they are now in sports, but as we've seen there is still room for vast improvement. Even ESPN, who has had and still has a large impact on the growth of women's sports, just recently implemented a new segment called espnW, which is solely dedicated to female sports and athletes. This new segment could potentially catapult women's sports in a broader spectrum than ever seen before. Time will tell. It's never too late to change, for you or ESPN, become a member of a female athletic fan base and help revolutionize women's sports even further.

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