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Behind the Lens: Unraveling the Absence of Leading Women in Authentic Sports Films

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Introduction: Women as Never Being the Iconic Stars in Sports Movies

In the realm of sports entertainment, male athletes have long dominated the big screen, with iconic films portraying their triumphs, struggles, and heroic journeys forever ingrained into cinematic history. *Rocky*, *Rudy*, *Air*, *Moneyball*, *Remember the Titans*, *The Blind Side*, *Iron Claw*, *Creed*, all incredibly popular and iconic films which follow the stories of male characters who overcame their struggles in a display of intense athleticism. While these movies are iconic for a reason, it is important to wonder why there are barely any sports movies with a female lead that can even hold a candle in comparison to the iconic titles aforementioned. While male athletes have been glorified and immortalized in countless films, the female characters have often been left to supporting roles or sidelined altogether. Even more troublesome, when women led sports movies are made, in order to tie in a male audience the male gaze is used, ultimately undermining women's athleticism in order to have female characters be sexually passive, use their looks and bodies to attract men, and prioritize emotions over sex (Kim et al. 2007). This discrepancy prompts a critical examination of the representation of women in sports movies and raises questions about the underlying factors contributing to their underrepresentation.

However, women's participation in competitive sports has seen a steady rise throughout the twenty-first century, reflecting a genuine quest for equality, autonomy over their bodies, and self-definition (Messner, 1988). Yet, despite these advancements, the dominant ideology of today suggests that a stark gender inequality still exists in sports. In other words, male athletes are widely more popular, more accepted, and more respected than female athletes. Recent research, such as the studies conducted by Cooky et al. (2013) and Godoy-Pressland (2014), have both shed light on the disparities in media coverage of women's sports, revealing a continued lack of representation and recognition. Even though in 2024, we have seen a larger number of

professional female athletes that have continued to break into the mainstream such as Simone Biles and Caitlin Clark, there is still a lack of female athletes on the big screen, and an overall lack of respect for women's sports, in direct comparison to men's sports. It begs the questions: Are the absence of women in sports films a consequence of audience beliefs? Or is the media the driving factor behind poor perceptions of women in sports?

Blue Crush: Women as the Visual

In light of these ongoing challenges faced by female athletes, it is imperative to examine how “teen movies,” which have been found to have some of the most media influence in emerging adults in terms of gendered beliefs and perceptions regarding roles of women in society (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2008). These movies are no exception to the contribution of the portrayal and perception of women in sports. Just as recently as February of this year, Rotten Tomatoes named *Blue Crush* in the “Top 10 Essential Movies about Women in Sports” (Liu, 2024). While *Blue Crush* follows the story of three women who love surfing, a deeper look into the film uncovers how it is not what it may seem to be at first glance. While having female led stories is extremely important, when done wrong it merely continues perpetuating harmful stereotypes and patriarchal beliefs (Sutherland and Feltey, 2017). By examining specific elements within *Blue Crush*, I found the film is a key example of camerawork that caters to the male gaze, which is the perspective from which visual media often presents female characters as objects of desire, ultimately oversexualizing them in order to appeal to a male audience. In other words, women's bodies and sexuality are what are used to attract audiences, rather than their stories, which leaves many female characters in film extremely undeveloped and one-dimensional, as their main purpose, essentially, becomes being the “eye” candy. Through a

critical lens, this objectification of women's bodies and a prioritization of romantic narratives overshadow the actual athleticism of female athletes.

Throughout *Blue Crush*, specific scenes vividly illustrate the camera's fixation on the bodies of the female characters, particularly during surfing sequences. For instance, in the opening scenes where the women are shown surfing, the camera angles accentuate the water on their curves and skin, emphasizing their physical attractiveness over their athleticism. Despite some progress in moving away from the sexualization of women's bodies in sports, this perpetuation of the male gaze in sports films not only hinders the representation of real stories about women in sports but also reinforces gender stereotypes and body image expectations, as such depictions of the ideal female physique shape women's perceptions of what their bodies should look like (Bordo, 1993). This positions the female characters of not only *Blue Crush*, but any sports film that incorporates the male gaze in the portrayal of the female characters, as objects of sexual desire, rather than as athletes. This dominance of the male gaze continues to shape the portrayal of women athletes, limiting their visibility and agency on screen, as their personal stories become secondary to their sexual appeal. Agency, in this context, meaning the ability of female athletes to assert control over their own narratives and depict their experiences authentically, free from the constraints of objectification and stereotyping. As a result of this objectification leading to a lack of agency, the sports movie industry remains entrenched in narratives that cater to male audiences, even when they are female led and driven stories, ultimately overshadowing the diverse experiences and achievements of female athletes.

Furthermore, the film also places a disproportionate emphasis on the romantic relationships of the female characters, detracting from their individual aspirations in the sport of surfing. The movie becomes more of a rom-com, rather than a surfing movie, which would be

fair if not so marketed and pushed as a sports movie. One notable example is the protagonist's romantic involvement with a male surfer, which becomes a central plot point overshadowing her own journey and development as a surfer. Instead of showcasing her dedication and skill, the narrative shifts towards her romantic struggles, reinforcing the stereotype that women's accomplishments are secondary to their relationships with men (Rahman et al., 2022). In *Rocky*, his relationship with love interest Adrienne falls into the secondary, it is not what the movie wants you to remember the most, as the main event is Rocky's journey and his fight against Apollo Creed, a vast difference from the inciting events in *Blue Crush*.

Furthermore, when leading surfer Anne Marie is with her love interest, her physical softness is accentuated, in contrast to the strength depicted in her sports performances (Colling, 2014). The intimate moments she shares with love interest Matt are framed in a way that prioritizes Anne Marie's physical attractiveness and vulnerability, specifically catering to a heterosexual ideology. In contrast, Anne Marie's strength and athleticism are showcased more during her surfing performances, which notably all of film's female athletes have smaller, model-type bodies in swimsuits, furthering western ideologies that muscles are not considered to be feminine, so female athletes should not have them either (Krane et al., 2001). However, some of the athletic aspects of her character that she does possess are often overshadowed by the moments of intimacy with her love interest, where her physical softness takes center stage. The film's portrayal of Anne Marie as a multifaceted character is pushed aside by the prioritization of her physical attractiveness and vulnerability in intimate moments, detracting from her agency as a female athlete. This example shows the persuasive influence of the male gaze in shaping the portrayal of women in sports movies, emphasizing the need for more authentic and empowering representations of female athletes without an over emphasis of their body.

King Richard: Women as the Secondary

When it was announced that a movie about Serena and Venus Williams was going to be made, most women sport's fans were excited, especially since the Williams sisters' story is an authentic and empowering story for not only all athletes, but all women. In fact, on opening weekend 59% of all viewers were female (D'Alessandro, 2021). While *King Richard* provides a somewhat compelling portrayal of Venus and Serena Williams' journey to success in tennis, they are often overshadowed by their father, Richard Williams, portrayed by Will Smith. This shift in focus raises questions about whose story is being told and whose perspective is actually prioritized in the film: The Williams sisters' or Richard's?

While *King Richard* celebrates the Williams sisters' achievements, it also inadvertently diminishes their individuality, positioning them as secondary characters within their own life story, a life story that had already impacted millions of lives. Before I delve into some key scenes, it is important to preface two key things. Firstly, this is in no way meant to discredit the involvement that Richard Williams had in the athletic successes of both of his daughters. In fact, there is nothing more refreshing than seeing a man have such a passion for women's sports. It is a reminder of how we can all come together to uplift women in their sport, in order to challenge and change the intense ideologies that hold successful women back, even more so for women of color. Secondly, in terms of media visibility, which is the main subject of this paper, Richard's involvement does highlight the broader issue of representation and visibility for women, especially women of color, in sports media. It is actually most influential when men and women can come together to create societal change (Sutherland, 2013). When looking through an optimistic lens, his advocacy for Venus and Serena's success not only defies societal norms but also forces viewers and the media to confront their biases and expectations regarding women's

behavior and achievements in sports. His involvement in their success is not something that should be overlooked. However, the main issue that *King Richard* holds is the potential it had to be a prominent and successful story solely about the Williams sisters, especially when in 2022, the year following the film's release, only 31 films out of 449 had a woman of color in a leading role (Tapp, 2024). Moreover, in general, lack of female representation is especially pronounced for Black women, as their stories are seldom told (hooks, 2003). Rather than being the story of the Williams sisters with their father as the supporting character, it becomes just another example of how successful stories about sports have to have a man in the forefront, even when the man is not the one playing the sport in question.

A pivotal moment in the film is when Richard decides to pull Venus out of a junior tournament after she experiences racial discrimination from tournament officials. This scene highlights the systemic barriers faced by Black athletes in predominantly upper-class white dominated sports such as tennis. Richard decides to pull Venus from the tournament out of a need to not only protect her, but protect her love for tennis. However, Venus's resilience and determination to overcome this adversity are somewhat overshadowed, reinforcing the perception of her as a passive recipient of her father's guidance. Even though most of the film follows true events, the key in this scene is the lack of Venus's perspective at all, exemplifying the lack of agency most female characters in sports movies possess. In the scene Richard says: "I'm not gonna let my daughters play in a rigged game. We got a job to do, and that's to make sure that you become the best tennis player in the world. And to do that, you gotta keep your eye on the ball, not on the bull." While Richard's words convey his deep commitment to Venus's success and his determination to shield her from discrimination, they also inadvertently reinforce the perception of her as a passive participant in her own journey. This is no means trying to say

that Richard's words were not influential to Venus, but when the whole scene is centered around Richard pulling Venus from the tournament, rather than her own thoughts and feelings towards her situation, it undermines her involvement in her own story. By centering the narrative on Richard's protective instincts, rather than the emotions and consequences on Venus, the scene inadvertently sidelines Venus's individuality, thereby making her a secondary character within her own story.

Additionally, the film delves into the sacrifices made by Venus and Serena in pursuit of their tennis careers, including their separation from their mother, Oracene Price. While Oracene is portrayed as a supportive figure in their lives, her absence from the forefront of their narrative further emphasizes the dominance of Richard's perspective. Despite her integral role in shaping Venus and Serena's identities, Oracene is relegated to the sidelines, reinforcing the patriarchal dynamics within their family dynamic. Oracene's role as a supportive mother is undeniable. She provides emotional support, encouragement, and guidance to Venus and Serena as they navigate the challenges of professional tennis. However, despite her integral role in shaping their identities and aspirations, Oracene's presence is overshadowed by the dominant perspective of her husband, Richard. This dynamic reinforces traditional gender roles and underscores the challenges faced by women in asserting their agency and recognition within familial and societal structures (Sutherland, and Feltey, 2017) . Despite her supportive role, Oracene is not merely a passive bystander in her daughters' journey. She, too, possesses a fierce determination and unwavering belief in Venus and Serena's potential. In a moment of profound conviction, Oracene declares, "These girls are going to be tennis champions. I don't care what it takes. They're going to be the best in the world." However, despite Oracene's impassioned declaration, her contributions and sacrifices are often overlooked and downplayed in favor of highlighting

Richard's role as the primary architect of their tennis careers. While Richard's dedication and determination is extremely important in the story of Venus and Serena, it is essential to acknowledge Oracene's sacrifices and unwavering support as equally significant factors in Venus and Serena's journey to success. Again, this is in no means meant to discredit Richard's influence, rather to note the film's tendency to push characters aside, to shine a brighter light on Richard, the only dominant male character in the film.

She's the Man: Women as Men?

Even though the majority of sports movies lack a female character that is not overly sexualized or lacks agency within her own story, there are a handful of movies that stand out as the exception for good examples of lead female characters who have their own storylines, are not part of the male gaze, and face the challenges of being a female athlete head on. *She's the Man* and *Bend it Like Beckham* emerge as better women led examples of films that celebrate the athleticism, determination, and resilience of female athletes. Both of these movies offer refreshing portrayals of women in sports, challenging stereotypes and inspiring audiences with their empowering narratives, as each hold stark differences from *Blue Crush* and *King Richard*. However, it is important to note here that not every aspect of either of these movies is perfect representation, both films hold places where there is definitely room for improvement, but even so they offer two of the best representations of women in sports movies, even more impressive when considering that both of these films were made in the early 2000s. Made almost 20 years ago, the only male dominated aspects of these films are found within their titles.

She's the Man presents a refreshing take on women in sports movies, diverging from traditional gender norms and societal expectations. The film centers around character Viola

Hastings, a high school student who, inspired by the convenient timing of her twin brother's absence from school, decides to disguise herself as him in order to join the boys' soccer team at her brother's school after her school decided to cut the girls' team due to a lack of interest. Originally when her team was cut, she asked the coach of the boy's soccer team if some of the girls could try out to join their team, with the coach responding with: "Girls aren't as fast as boys, or as strong, or as athletic. This isn't me talking, it's science. Girls can't beat boys, it's as simple as that." Viola is met head on with the challenge and bias that women athletes face daily, the prevailing stereotype that associates sports with masculinity, which suggests that females are physically incapable of excelling in this domain (Young, 1980). Even when female athletes prove over and over again that they are capable of excelling in sports, this is only respected in discussion with competing with other women. Once a woman is placed in a discussion about competing with another male athlete, it is a seemingly outlandish idea to think that a woman could be better at a sport than a man. This further pushes the patriarchal hegemony that reigns over sports, or the dominance and control exerted by male-dominated systems and structures within sports communities that perpetuate the power and privilege of men over women (Khan, 2021). At the end of the film, Viola reveals to the team that she is not actually her brother, but his identical twin sister, and wins the game against her own school's boy's team, the team that had told her it would be impossible for a girl to beat them. Her triumph not only proves her own capabilities but also challenges entrenched gender biases, demonstrating to both women and men alike that gender should not dictate one's prowess in sports.

While there is a romance happening simultaneously and *She's the Man* is noted as a rom-com, the romance is the secondary story, merely used to fit into the genre of an early 2000s teen girl movie. However, what sets it apart from *Blue Crush*, is how the romantic story is

handled. Rather than overshadowing Viola's athleticism and love for soccer, the conflict between Viola and her interest Duke, who plays on the boy's soccer team with her, is solved within a mere 25 seconds and is never used to position Viola's story as just being there to be with Duke. Unlike *Blue Crush*, where the female characters are often objectified and reduced to their physical appearance, *She's the Man* actually prioritizes Viola's skills, determination, and passion for soccer. This shift in focus allows Viola to emerge as a strong and empowered protagonist, challenging the notion that women's value is determined solely by their attractiveness to men. Instead, her value, strength, and determination is shown through her actions and dedication to her sport.

Moreover, the film is a critique of gender roles in general. Drawing inspiration from William Shakespeare's "The Twelfth Night," the film explores themes of gender ambiguity and performance, showcasing the fluidity of gender perceptions. The film portrays a world where, for a woman to garner respect, she must adopt masculine attire (Carlin, 2016). Viola's struggle to reconcile her identity with societal expectations is epitomized in her conflict with her mother, who adheres to traditional gender roles, wanting Viola to be more "lady-like" by deprioritizing soccer in her life. Despite her mother's insistence on a feminine identity, Viola resists, challenging the notion that a choice must be made between being feminine and being an athlete (Messner, 1988). Moreover, the film introduces Duke as a counterpoint to traditional masculinity, portraying him as a sensitive and emotionally expressive character who defies traditional male gender roles. His interactions with Viola, both as Sebastian and as herself, challenge conventional expectations of male behavior and reveal the complexity of gender dynamics.

Despite its progressive portrayal of gender, "She's the Man" still falls prey to heteronormative conventions, particularly in its treatment of romantic relationships. While She's

the Man concludes with a typical Hollywood resolution that reinforces heteronormative norms, with the end scene being Duke and Viola getting together, the mere inclusion of unconventional characters and scenarios in the film that challenge gender norms and comment on gender performance, especially the challenge on the belief that women cannot be as dominant as men are in a sport, can be seen as ultimately beneficial, and a big step for women led sports movies moving forward (Aranjuez, 2017).

Bend it Like Beckham: Women as Rule Benders

Released in 2002, the film *Bend it Like Beckham* not only addressed the crucial themes of identity and British-Indian culture, but it also captured the essence of soccer as one of the few aspects of “Britishness” capable of uniting an entire nation—both men and women (Pindoria, 2022). The film stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and determination of women in sports, addressing the intersectionality between gender and culture, particularly focusing on how these intersections impact women in sports. According to the director of the film, Gurinder Chadha, David Beckham’s trademark move (the bend of his kick) is to be seen as a metaphor that inspires young women to bend any number of rules so they can pursue their personal objectives and establish a meaningful identity (May, 2010). The film follows the journey of Jess Bhamra, a British-Indian teenager who holds an unyielding passion for soccer. Right off the bat, the film depicts a girl who wants to pave her own pathway, and holds perspectives and agency, determined to create her own story. Throughout the film, Jess must fight against her mothers comments such as “What family would want a daughter-in-law who could kick football all around and cannot make round chappathis?” in order to keep her soccer dreams alive. Despite facing cultural barriers and familial expectations that dictate she should focus on more traditional

pursuits, Jess defies conventions and boldly pursues her dream of playing soccer. She fights against her parents' beliefs that it was outlandish for a young girl to want to be a professional soccer player, as parents are often less willing to give time and resources up for their daughters' sport, which makes continued involvement and success difficult (Coakley and White, 1992). Throughout the film, Jess's journey is portrayed with agency and control as she navigates the complexities of identity, family, and societal expectations.

The driving factor that really sets *Bend it Like Beckham* from other sports films such as *King Richard*, is Jess's complete control throughout the movie. She is a multifaceted, multi-dimensional character, with the agency to forge her own path. One of the most important scenes in *Bend it Like Beckham* occurs when Jess confronts her conservative parents about her burning desire to pursue soccer. In this pivotal moment, Jess passionately argues for her right to follow her passion, challenging her parents' narrow-minded views and asserting her autonomy. Her declaration, "I don't want to be a bloody solicitor! I want to play football!" encapsulates her intense determination to break free from societal norms and pursue her athletic dreams, despite the pressures placed upon her. This scene embodies how women in sports are treated, with their dreams not taken as seriously as men, as Jess refuses to succumb to these restrictive gender roles and boldly asserts her agency as a woman pursuing her passion in sports (Coakley and White, 1992). Her unwavering determination to pursue soccer on her own terms reflects the broader struggle for gender equality in sports, where women are often marginalized and discouraged from participating in traditionally male-dominated activities.

As Jess navigates the complexities of identity and familial expectations, she emerges as a symbol of strength, inspiring women to challenge intersectional conventions and pursue their passions unapologetically. By centering Jess's journey around her pursuit of soccer, *Bend it Like*

Beckham not only celebrates the resilience of female athletes pushing back against gender norms, but also highlights the transformative power of breaking free from societal constraints. The cultural impact also extends beyond the realm of sports movies, resonating with audiences worldwide and sparking conversations about gender equality and cultural representation in media, showcasing that women do not just have to hold one identity. Women can be cultural, athletic, authentic, powerful, and resilient (Heir, 2017). The film's authentic portrayal of Jess's Indian culture, her struggle, and ultimately her acceptance as a woman in soccer, has inspired real female athletes to pursue their dreams fearlessly and defy societal expectations. A short documentary done by BBC on the cultural impact of the film showcases a South Asian woman footballer who plays for Women's Super League, talking about how looking up to Jess's character actively changed the course of her life, inspiring her to pursue professional football (Pindoria, 2022). As a result, *Bend it Like Beckham* has not only elevated the visibility of women in sports, but has also helped pave the way for some female athletes to forge their own path and follow their professional athletic dreams. Overall, the film sensitively portrays the clash between tradition and modernity, highlighting the importance of cultural acceptance and understanding in an increasingly diverse society.

While *Bend it Like Beckham* is an exceptional depiction of the intersectionality of gender and culture within sports, it does not entirely abandon traditional ideas about femininity. Instead, the film's rejection of "traditional" femininity allows it to maintain certain notions about femininity. For example, early in the film, while playing soccer in the park, Jess is approached by three Asian girls who comment on the boys she's playing with. When they tease Jess about her relationship with her male friend Tony, she responds by asserting her chastity saying, "Oh, shut up. You know he's just my mate. We're not all sluts like you lot." This remark reinforces a more

traditional, conservative association between femininity and a controlled sexuality. Women are to be the objects of sexual desire, but never the ones who over act on it like men can (Kowalski and Scheitle, 2019). Furthermore, during a night out in Germany, Jess feels uncomfortable realizing she hasn't brought "appropriate" clothes, but her friends help her and in the next scene she is heavily made up and wearing a tight-fitting dress. The admiration she receives from her teammates indicates that the film expects the audience to appreciate her transformation. This implies that progressive women must embody both athleticism and a conventional feminine beauty (Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb, 2015). While this is a push-back against ideologies that believe that femininity and athleticism cannot go hand in hand, at the same time it leaves little room for women who reject traditional norms of feminine beauty. Even so, *Bend it Like Beckham* represented the intersections between culture and female athleticism in a way that had never been done before, and sadly, never has been done again since its release. By challenging stereotypes and celebrating the resilience of women in sports, *Bend it Like Beckham* has left an undeniable mark on the cultural landscape, inspiring generations of female athletes to pursue their dreams and defy expectations (Heir, 2017).

Conclusions: Women as the Most Popular College Athletes

The underrepresentation of women in sports movies and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes continues to persist as critical issues within the realm of media and entertainment. While iconic sports films have long celebrated the triumphs of male athletes, female characters have often been relegated to supporting roles, objectified for the male gaze, or some combination of both, ultimately mirroring society's opinions about female athletes, rather than attempting to challenge and change them. This problem in film ultimately reflects broader societal biases and

challenges faced by women in sports, where their achievements and narratives are frequently overshadowed by those of their male counterparts. However, amidst these challenges, there are some examples of films that challenge traditional gender norms and empower female athletes. Although neither completely perfect, *She's the Man* and *Bend it Like Beckham*, still emerge as signals of progress, offering refreshing portrayals of women in sports that prioritize their athleticism, determination, and agency. These films not only celebrate the resilience of female athletes, but also inspire female audiences to always challenge conventions and to pursue their passions unapologetically.

Moreover, as the popularity of women's basketball continues to rise, as a continuation for next steps, it would be interesting to see if this popularity will be mirrored within the film industry with more films that follow the stories of female athletes who play basketball, which had been commonly dubbed as a more “manly” sport (Alley & Hicks, 2005). As athletes like Angel Reese and Caitlin Clark captivate audiences with their exceptional talent and athleticism, there is a growing demand for more diverse and authentic representations of women in sports media, challenging the notion that any sport in particular is completely “manly”. However, the film industry should not wait until society holds no problems, stereotypes, or restricting ideologies towards women athletes, as this day simply will never come. Even with how popular women's sports has become this year, there is still a long way to go until women's sports are not only as represented as men's, but most importantly, as respected as men's.

One of the main reasons that Clark and Reese have been able to be one of the driving factors in the rise of popularity in women's basketball is not only through both of their record breaking talents, but also through their fierce rivalry that directly negates the assumption that women's sports are “boring”, as telecasters and the media, in general, now take place in more

intriguing discussions and discourse surrounding women's sports (Chaffe, 2017). In fact, this year saw an unprecedented amount of attention fall onto the women's NCAA national tournament, where for the first time ever more viewers tuned in to watch the women's final than the men's final. This has been a shocking spike in popularity, as it was only two years ago that the NCAA approved the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament to use the March Madness branding across the collegiate spectrum (Djajapranata, 2024). Many fans now find women's basketball as compelling as men's basketball for a handful of reasons, but the overall vast increase of media coverage and the popularity of the rivalry between Caitlyn Clark and other popular NCAA players such as Paige Bueckers and Angel Reese can mainly be credited. In fact, WNBA commissioner Cathy Engelbert has called this time period "Our Magic-Bird moment," relating back to a time where Magic Johnson and Larry Bird's intense rivalry was mainly credited for a large spike in interest towards the NBA (Schrotenboer, 2024). Nevertheless, the surge in popularity and attention does not negate the ongoing problems in the treatment and discourse surrounding many female athletes, even within the NCAA, where misogynistic and racially charged comments persist, diminishing the overall respect towards their athleticism.

After the national championship last year, the criticism that fell upon Angel Reese for "taunting" Caitlin Clark was unprecedented, shocking, and simply wrong, as being a young Black woman in sports, she faces the most backlash due to the intersectionalities of race and gender. This can be related back to the ongoing idea that persists in basketball in which Black basketball players have been categorized according to their "natural" athletic abilities, whereas the white basketball players have been more publicly seen as the "smarter," more "intellectual" players (hooks, 1994). Clark has been deemed as one of the smartest female basketball players

ever, while Reese has been more notably known as the “villain” in the Caitlyn Clark story, even though far more credit should also be given to Reese in terms of her knowledge and athletic abilities in basketball for the surge of popularity for women’s basketball. Reese receives little praise for her athletic abilities, almost as if her ability is less surprising, therefore making the hatred towards her more normalized and accepted because of her race. The media is insanely quick to jump on Reese and scrutinize her every move, magnifying any mistakes or missteps while downplaying her achievements, as they refuse to see her as a wholly intelligent player, the same way they see Clark. Clark has even vocalized her support for Reese, saying she understood the taunting as they are both fierce competitors within basketball. However, this has not been able to stop the wrath that Angel Reese unprecedentedly receives for being a young Black woman existing in sports, which mirrors the ongoing struggles for equity and representation faced by Black women in sports, despite their undeniable talent and dedication to the game.

Even though Angel Reese has received more backlash than Caitlin Clark ever has, this does not mean Clark is immune to misogyny from the media, as many social media users attempted to discount her scoring record after she passed Pete Maravich for the leading NCAA scorer saying that the “circumstances” were different for both players, and that it was easier for Clark to be able to score more. Furthermore, many male social media users enjoy commenting on Clark’s appearance, with one social media user tweeting “Hand up, I’ll be the first one to admit I’d be a bigger Caitlin Clark fan if she looked more like Cameron Brink.” This tweet has over 6,000 likes, and for further context, Cameron Brink is another female college basketball player with blonde hair and blue eyes. Such remarks not only diminish both Clark and Brink’s athletic achievements, but also reduce their worth as players to their physical appearances. The focus on Clark’s looks rather than her skills underscores the persistent objectification of female

athletes in the media and society at large, as seen in *Blue Crush*, where women's appearances are put above their skill and athleticism. This type of commentary not only undermines Clark's professional identity but also contributes to a hostile environment for female athletes, reinforcing the notion that their worth is tied to conventional beauty standards rather than their athletic abilities (Mannion, 2015).

Drawing from the concept of the male gaze and patriarchal ideologies limiting women's agency within sports media, it becomes evident that the portrayal of women in sports movies is often influenced by entrenched gender biases and societal expectations. Moving forward, it is imperative for the film industry to continue diversifying representations of women in sports, providing more nuanced and authentic portrayals that reflect the diversity of women's experiences and identities as the rise of women's sports continues to become more and more popularized. The film industry should lift up women in sports and challenge misogynistic opinions that society still garners towards many female athletes, which is in some ways getting worse as more and more social media users attempt to bring down and discredit popular female athletes. Even though this year has seen an unprecedented amount of attention focused on women's sports, they are able to sustain audiences only when the news media gives it attention first, and keeps the games and competitions easily accessible to audiences (Mastrangelo, 2024). Women's sports are something that can hold an equal sense of excitement and rivalry that men's sports culturally hold, as the women's NCAA tournament directly proved this to audiences. There are no longer excuses for the film industry to continue letting audiences down with their poor and inaccurate portrayals of women in sports. Women are more than their appearances, they hold agency and strength to be compelling characters in the sports realm, and no longer need male characters or male gaze tactics to capture and hold audiences. Caitlyn Clark, Paige

Bueckers, Angel Reese, JuJu Watkins, Cameron Brink, Kamilla Cardoso, all the stars of the women's NCAA tournament proved that women's sports are just as, if not more, entertaining and culturally impactful as men's. However, as noted in this paper, aspects of society still hold both misogynistic and racist views towards women in sports. Therefore, further efforts to dismantle patriarchal norms and challenge the male gaze within sports films are crucial to promoting gender equality and empowering female athletes both on and off the big screen.

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