Women and sports: A hope for the future? Or a reality of now?

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Ever since the inception of Title IX, part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, high schools and universities across the country have been striving to comply and provide equal opportunities for females in the area of athletic participation. According to the official Title IX website, over 40% of all high school athletes were female in 2006-2007, whereas before 1972, less then 4% of females participated in any sort of athletics (Title IX Info Athletics, 2011). Over the past 30-plus years, women as athletes have become a much more accepted part of our society. Women endorse sporting goods, they draw high crowds for sporting events, and they have become as big of icons as some men in a few sports.

Over the past 10 years or so, questions have continually been raised over whether or not enough coverage is provided to women’s sports in the media often comparing the amount women receive to that of men’s sports. This study will focus specifically on coverage of the 2011 NCAA Women’s Basketball tournament in comparison with the 2011 NCAA Men’s Basketball tournament.

Other previous studies have focused on broader media, such as the Internet (Kian, Mondello, & Vincent, 2009), but few have focused on how women’s athletics are specifically portrayed on a given show. This review looks to fill some of those gaps and provide specific examples of how coverage between men and women’s sports compare.

This study will compare and contrast the coverage of both the men and women’s NCAA basketball tournament on the network ESPN and more specifically its daily sports news show, SportsCenter. The study will begin on March 15, 2011 when the first men’s game is played, and will end on April 5, 2011, when the women’s tournament concludes. The study will observe the manner in which both sports are portrayed on each SportsCenter following game days. Aspects of the show that will be considered will be the gender of the anchors delivering the news, the amount of time each tournament is allotted in a given segment of SportsCenter, and the overall manner in which the participating athletes are portrayed either through on-air analysis or the type of video highlights replayed. While males typically watch more sports-related programming than women, and that holds true for SportsCenter as women only make up 22% of their nightly viewers (Tuggle, 1997), women do make up over 40% of total viewers for all major sports in the United States, making this study reviewing how both NCAA tournaments are portrayed highly relevant.

As more time passed from 1972, the gap between men and women in terms of athletic ability began to shrink. Men have been faster then women in terms of speed since track and field has been around. Starting in 1920 women began to increase their times in running sports, while men have remained fairly stable in their times. Men still have been significantly faster than women, but recently, not as much. Starting in 1972, women increased their speed over 10% while men have only seen a 3% change in their times. Since then, scientists have found that the gender gap in sport performance has been stable since 1983, and that women may never catch up to men. While the gap reduced greatly for those first 11 years, the gap between men and women now moves parallel and may be set (Thibault, Guillaume, Berthelot, El Helou, & Schaal, 2010). Among casual sports fans all across the country, this is often a point of contention as to why some people do not enjoy watching women’s sports. However, over the last year or so, several women have been popping up sporadically in different places with unprecedented amounts of athleticism, especially in women’s basketball.

Baylor University in Waco, Texas, signed Brittney Griner, a 6 foot 8 inch woman, in the spring of 2009. She is a young woman who possesses athleticism comparable to a man her age and routinely dunks the ball in games (Skeets, 2007). Her play has raised questions as to whether her athleticism is good for the game, or if she could even some day play in the NBA, but most of all, it has brought attention to the sport of women’s basketball. Her blocks, dunks, and general domination of the women’s game have several appearances on SportsCenter. However some proponents of women’s sports believe that attention was not enough and was also very short lived. Some believe that this is because women’s sports are severely underreported. This creates an illusion that not very many women participate in sports because they aren’t seen doing so on the most watched sports shows (Tuggle, 1997).

As previously stated, similar studies to this have been done on other mediums in a broader context, but provide similar results. In studies conducted on the 2006 men’s and women’s basketball championships, in national newspapers, it was found that 76% of all articles written pertaining to the events were on the men’s tournament (Kian, Mondello & Vincent, 2008). Studies such as these helped determine the research question to be asked to determine representations of women in the 2011 NCAA basketball championships.

**RQ1**: How does the portrayal of women in the 2011 NCAA Basketball National Championship on SportsCenter compare and contrast to that of men in the same sport at the same time?

While this studies aim to remain unbiased, it will be interesting to see whether or not this will shed light onto the situation of women in sports. It’s curious to see if a power-house like ESPN can control a country’s thoughts on an entire sports genre or rather if it is ratings and what the people who watch SportsCenter demand that determines the amount of sports coverage on any given day. This study should also help show if people on both sides of the fence are just choosing to see what they want to see by ignoring the facts. If equal coverage is shown and fair reporting is done, studies like this and perhaps even more professional ones would go along way to helping women and finding their place alongside men in the world of sports.

*Methodology*

The sample used for this analysis was the live morning SportsCenter that aired every weekday from March 15, 2011, until April 5, 2011. SportsCenter was selected because it is the highest rated general sports show on television and would therefore give the best chance at seeing both tournaments covered as equally as possible (Sports Shows, 2011). ESPN, the network on which SportsCenter airs, is also the only television station devoted solely towards national sports coverage, relieving the possibility of slanted coverage towards a shows regional location and teams from that area, either men’s or women’s, being covered more extensively. March 15 was chosen as the starting date because that is when the NCAA Men’s National Tournament began, and April 5 was chosen as the end date because that is when the NCAA Women’s National Tournament concluded.

The entire episode of SportsCenter was used as the unit of analysis for the study because coverage of each tournament was done throughout the entire sixty-minute episode. The first category was simply the amount of time each tournament was talked about. Coders were instructed to time the amount each tournament was discussed on the episode and to write down the total amount for each tournament at the end of the show.

The second category was used to determine how the men and women’s tournaments were framed on SportsCenter. For this, a coding sheet was developed to count the number of times certain phrases or on-air personalities or analysts used stereotypical words. A list of words was developed that are typically involved with the discussion of athletics, especially basketball (Kian, Mondello & Vincent, 2008). Those words were strength, speed, athletic, long, dunk, up-tempo, high-flying, talent, pro players/potential. All of those words were listed as athletic terms. Another list of words was created that included: team game, slow- pace, below the rim. These words were categorized as un-athletic. Each term was to be counted by the coder each time it was used and was to be marked whether or not it was in reference to the men’s tournament or the women’s tournament. The men’s and women’s game of basketball is played with the same rules, using these two different sets of words will make it easier to identify how the two tournament’s are being framed for the audience. The coders were also instructed to list every male basketball player mentioned by name and to the do the same for every female basketball player. Lastly on the coding sheet was a list of terms related to the specific coverage of the tournaments. The coders were asked to keep track of the sex of the anchor or analyst and to note whether or not the analysts were former athletes. It was also noted whether or not the segment took place in-studio or on location. It’s important to note how the specific tournaments are covered because it speaks directly to how ESPN is framing the tournaments.

The coder for this project was a recently graduated student of Drury University. He is not a basketball fan and had no ties to any team in the tournament, men’s or women’s, so he should not have had any tendency’s to sway his results on the coding sheet, even though there shouldn’t be any questions with how to code the episodes. It is important to note that the coder did not watch these episodes live, but rather was allowed to watch them at his leisure. The episodes were watched in order.

*Results*

The research question concerned the portrayal of women from the NCAA National tournament on the show SportsCenter in comparison to the portrayal of men on the same show.

The coder watched a total of sixteen episodes of SportsCenter for his analysis and then added all of his numbers together to give us a grand total for the time period studied. The following table represents the totals from the coder and should be able to provide us with a clear view of how both women and men basketball players were portrayed during this year’s NCAA tournament and allow us to see how SportsCenter frames the women’s tournament.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Men | Women |
| Time Discussed  Avg. | 18:09 | 5:56 |
| Athletic Words Used  Total | 112 | 32 |
| Un-Athletic Words Used  Total | 14 | 37 |
| Players Named  Total | 224 | 144 |

The second table shows how the coverage was portrayed on SportsCenter in terms of anchors and analysts.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Men’s  Tournament | Women’s  Tournament |
| Male Anchor | X | X |
| Female Anchor | X | X |
| Male Analyst/Former Athlete | X |  |
| Female Analyst/  Former Athlete |  | X |
| In-Studio | X |  |
| On-Site | X | X |

These results lead to several conclusions as well as several possibilities for future research and discussion. One of the more interesting results of this analysis isn’t necessarily how women were framed but rather the lack of any framing at all. You can see from the first table that the women’s tournament was talked about over 66% less time on average then that of the men’s tournament. That statistic alone affects every other result because if they aren’t being portrayed on the show, then key words and phrases cannot be said about them. When highlights were shown, you can notice that not a lot of athletic words or phrases were used to describe their game, but not a lot of un-athletic words were used either. Compared to the men, the number may seem off, but in the big scheme of things, 37 words in 16 episodes really isn’t that much. You also compare that to the total number of games played in the women’s tournament, 64, and that comes out to less than one word for every game. This surprises me, and if we were to stop here, one might think that women were being framed better than originally thought. However, the number that is most alarming is the number of times an athletic word or phrase was used to describe the women’s game. 32 athletic words or phrases were used to describe highlights from 64 games. Coverage may have averaged less than 6 minutes out of an episode, but every game was at least mentioned once (Tuggle, 1997). What does this mean? It means that the women’s tournament was simply being covered, not analyzed like the men’s game was. It also points out that the men’s game is described with adjectives that spark interest and entertainment, while the women’s game is delivered more like a news story. Twelve minutes more of coverage per episode means 12 minutes more to inform, entertain, and draw fans in. The women’s game is framed as interesting, but the men’s game is framed as enthralling. The second table provides more facts to back up the finding in the first. From this table we can conclude that the men’s tournament was discussed in studio, and that doesn’t include just highlights, but rather analyzed as well. Former players and analysts discussed key games in-depth during each of the 16 episodes. The men’s game was also discussed on site at the Final Four location as well as other key cities throughout the start of the tournament. We can see that the women’s tournament, excluding highlights, was only analyzed on-site. On top of that, no male analyzed any woman’s game and no female ever analyzed a men’s game. Both female and male anchors discussed both tournaments, but another interesting fact was that a male anchor was always the lead for the women’s tournament on-site analysis.

*Conclusion and Future Discussions*

One thing is for sure, the amount of coverage between the NCAA Men’s Tournament and the NCAA Women’s Tournament is far from equal. Is that fair? That’s a tougher question to answer. This study and analysis is limited to that of SportsCenter and therefore the results could be slightly skewed. Despite the low numbers for the women’s tournament, ESPN carries every game of the women’s tournament, so maybe they are showing more of it than any other sports outlet, which is a scary thing. You have to take into account ratings, which this study did not do, but knowing what we know about ratings and how they drive Television; you can’t help but think that has something to do without the amount of coverage we receive of each.

An interesting future study to conduct would be a poll of SportsCenter viewers. Several questions could be asked about each tournament to determine how the show is framed to actual viewers. One thing that would be interesting to ask would be that of names of specific players and coaches. I think we would find that both male and female viewers would find it hard to come up with as many female names as male names from the sheer lack of coverage. We are inundated with back stories about each men’s team, key players, underdogs, stories we can relate to, and stories we just don’t get with women’s teams. Is this wrong? Again, that’s a hard question to answer.

Is it ESPN’s job to change the popularity of women’s basketball? One could argue they would love to change people’s perception of women’s basketball, because they show the tournament every year. Another interesting study would be to look at local coverage of each team in the tournament, both men and women, and determine if their coverage reflects the attitude of the rest of the country, and if it doesn’t, to figure out why.

The results of this study were fairly typical to that of similar studies and say a lot about how we view women in sports. What it doesn’t do, or cannot do, is say whether or not this is right or wrong. Women have come along way in sports over the last 100 years, and have made huge leaps over the past 40 years (Thibault, Guillaume, Berthelot, El Helou, & Schaal, 2010). Do women have to become more popular in sports? What I know is that rarely are things ever equal in this world, and if I look at the past compared to now in terms of where we are with respect towards women’s sports, I would be pleased with where we have come.

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