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## Review

# Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really “come a long way, baby”?



Janet S. Fink\*

University of Massachusetts Amherst, United States

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### ABSTRACT

The 2012 London Olympic Games were heralded as the “Year of the Woman” as every delegation sent a female athlete to compete in the games, and nearly 45% of all athletes were women. Indeed, sport participation amongst girls and women is currently at an all-time high, and these sportswomen deliver remarkable athletic performances. However, female athletes and women's sport still receive starkly disparate treatment by the sport media commercial complex compared to male athletes and men's sport. This review documents these qualitative and quantitative differences and discusses the negative impact this differential coverage has on consumer perceptions of women's sport and female athletes. Additionally, the author examines explanations for these differences. The review concludes with suggestions for future research and strategies for change.

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## 1. Introduction

As never before, women are making their presence felt in the world of sport, and there are a wealth of opportunities for the media to influence society's acceptance of all female athletes... (Fink, 1998, p. 40)

The sentence above was written immediately after a very strong showing by the female athletes of the United States Olympic Team in the 1996 Summer Games. As the quote suggests, researchers harbored some guarded optimism that the media coverage, marketing, and promotion of female athletes and women's sport would be positively transformed. We anticipated that the tremendous progress female athletes experienced in terms of their ability 25 years after Title IX (at that time) would soon bring greater media attention in terms of quantity, but also, a qualitative reform in which female athletes would be truly celebrated as legitimate athletes. Sadly, 15 years after that article was published and 40 years since the passage of Title IX, very little has changed with respect to the media coverage, marketing, and promotion of female athletes and women's sport. As I will demonstrate in this review, female athletes and women's sport are still woefully under-represented in all types of media and sportswomen are rarely acclaimed solely for their athletic abilities. Instead, the focus is often on their physical appearance, femininity, and/or heterosexuality.

\* Correspondence address: Mark H. McCormack Department of Sport Management, Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 121 Presidents Drive, Amherst, MA 01003, United States. Tel.: +1 413 545 7602.

E-mail address: [jfink@isenberg.umass.edu](mailto:jfink@isenberg.umass.edu)

This differential coverage bears enormous implications for the lives of women (and men) within sport and beyond. Sport's ubiquitous appeal renders it an immensely influential social institution and, as Kane (1988) has noted, "the mass media have become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values in modern culture" (p. 88–89). Indeed, researchers indicate that the manner in which the media frames issues impacts how the public perceives reality (Gitlin, 1980; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Thus, these quantitative and qualitative differences in sport media coverage are harmful, as they generate and reinforce stereotypical gender roles and negatively impact perceptions of women's capabilities. This differential coverage creates strongly embedded, taken-for-granted notions that serve to limit women far beyond sport, producing a variety of economic, social, and political limitations that intensify the patriarchal power structure still so sharply entrenched in our culture (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008).

Space restrictions do not allow for an exhaustive review of the literature on this topic. Instead, I hope to provide a sample of evidence that demonstrates these quantitative and qualitative differences still exist, and, in many cases, are even worse than 15 years ago. Additionally, I will review the implications of this differential treatment and the (relatively) new research that examines consumer reactions to different depictions of female athletes and women's sport. From there, I will present various explanations for this differential treatment, and, given this information, will offer suggestions for future research and strategies to invoke change.

It is important for the reader to understand this review deals not only with the media, but what Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) coined the "sport-media-commercial complex." In this interpretation, sport is not an isolated and separate entity "but is part of a larger, increasingly global economic nexus that utilizes mediated sports to advertise a huge range of consumer products" (Messner, 2002, p. 77). Thus, the review will cover depictions of female athletes and women's sport in all different types of media as well as in advertisements, endorsement campaigns, and other aspects of the sport media commercial complex.

## 2. Quantitative differences

The better sportswomen get, the more the media ignore them (Kane, 2013, p. 1)

### 2.1. Background

Consider these facts. In the 2012 Olympic Games in London, every participating national delegation sent a female athlete and 44.4% of all athletes participating were women (Brennan, 2012). In England, the number of women taking part in sport and physical activity increased by one million participants after London won the Olympic bid in 2005 (Department of Culture, Media, and Sport, 2012). In Australia, the Australian Football League (AFL) noted there was a 43% increase in females participating in football (soccer) in 1 year alone (from 2011 to 2012) (Elite Sports Properties, 2012). In the United States, over 3 million girls now participate in high school sports and 46% of intercollegiate scholarship athletes are women, while the number of women's professional sport opportunities is currently at an all-time high (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; National Federation of State High School Associations, 2013).

Further, sportswomen have made great athletic progress fairly quickly. In a 1966 *Sports Illustrated* article, John Underwood wrote, "It takes getting used to, seeing young women run long distances, gasping and gagging and staggering around and going down on all fours at the finish line, pink foreheads in the mud" (cited in Baker, 2011, para 1). The "long distance" Underwood referred to was a mile and a half! Fast forward to less than 50 years later, and we find that women make up the majority (56%) of all road race finishers and 42% of finishers in US marathons (Running USA, 2013). Further, in the 2013 New York City Marathon, 12 of the top 100 times were posted by women (New York Road Runners, 2013). As Kane (1995) has noted, "...there exists today a sport continuum, in which many women routinely outperform many men, and in some cases, women outperform most – if not all – men in a variety of sport and physical skills/activities" (p. 193). Indeed, ESPN's Sport Science host, John Brenkus recently declared, "We are only scratching the surface of what women will accomplish in sports" (2012, para. 1).

Thus, female athletes are participating in record numbers, and delivering record performances; yet, the media coverage and marketing of female athletes and women's sport does not reflect this progress (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013; Lumpkin, 2009; Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008). Researchers have consistently shown that female athletes (in a variety of countries) receive far less coverage than their male counterparts in written media (e.g., Bishop, 2003; Fullerton, 2006; Kian et al., 2008; Lumpkin, 2009; Pratt, Grappendorf, Grundvig, & LeBlanc, 2008), broadcast media (e.g., Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002, 2003; Caple, Greenwood, & Lumby, 2011; Cooky et al., 2013), and even new media (e.g., Burch, Eagleman, & Pedersen, 2012; Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Kian, Mondello, & Vincent, 2009).

### 2.2. Longitudinal studies of traditional media

Perhaps most troubling is the fact that several longitudinal studies, across a variety of media platforms, show the media coverage of women's sport and female athletes has actually *declined* over the years despite women's increased participation and athletic performance (Cooky et al., 2013; Kane, 2013). For example, Billings (2008) examined six Summer and Winter Olympic Games telecasts (1996–2006) and found no significant increase in the amount of coverage afforded to female athletes across the years. Billings, Angelini, and Duke (2010) examined NBC's prime time coverage of the Beijing Olympic

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