Women and sport

by Kari Fasting*

Women, Sports and the Media

The modern world is greatly influenced by communication, and the media have the potential to effect the opinions and attitudes of society. They are active agents in the construction of the meanings we give to things and their broad influence can have a vital impact, either advancing or impeding girls’ and women’s involvement in sport. The way they feature women’s sport is, therefore, of great importance to sports leaders who are trying to promote it.

As most of the research on women and sport in the media has been conducted in the USA, applying the conclusions to the rest of the world could be problematic. However, American TV being largely watched in many countries, the data gathered combined with additional information provided by several European studies, should provide an adequate basis for a general overview of the situation.

Presentation of women’s sports in the media

Under-representation

Studying the presentation of women’s sports in the media clearly establishes that it is underrepresented across cultures. Even though girls’ and women’s participation in sports has drastically increased over the past twenty years, women’s sports receive less time and space than men’s and are proportionally underrepresented compared to men’s sports. The Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, of which Anita L. DeFrantz is the director, has published reports on television and newspaper coverage, all of which demonstrate that media treat women’s sports quantitatively differently than men’s.

The first television studies published in 1990 showed that only 5% of air time was devoted to women’s sports (Duncan, Messner and Williams). This result was confirmed by a follow up study published in 1996 (Wilson). In a similar way, stories devoted to men’s sports in the written press received 28.8 times as many column inches as those devoted to women’s sports (Duncan, Messner and Williams 1991). In a study of Sports Illustrated cover photographs it was found that only 55 photographs of women, compared with 782 of men, were used (Salwen and Wood 1994).

A study conducted in Norway indicated a similar tendency. An analysis of the content of the four largest newspapers showed that about 15% of the sports articles were about women compared with 78% devoted to men, the rest being gender neutral (Haukeberg and Syrstad 1995). Considering that sports journalists usually wrote only about top-level sport, the researchers counted the medals won by Norwegian male and female athletes over the same year in the Olympic Games, European and World Championships and World Cups. The results showed that 62% of the medals had been won by men and 38% by women. The newspaper column centimetres for each gender’s results was 82% for men versus 18% for women. This clearly demonstrated that, even if the media policy that “we write about top-level women’s sports if the women athletes are good enough” was accepted, female athletes had clearly been underrepresented.

Trivialization and sexualization

Another important aspect of the relationship between sportswomen and the media is the way female athletes are portrayed. American studies have shown that they tend to be infantilized. Adult women are often referred to as “girls”, while men of the same age are never called “boys”. Female athletes are called by their first names more often than male athletes. Announcers usually speak of men’s performances using words implying strength and control whereas words suggesting...
weakness are more likely to be used when women’s sports are discussed (Wilson 1996). Significant differences in the quality of technical production tend to trivialize women’s games, while framing men’s games as dramatic spectacles of historic significance (Duncan, Messner and Williams 1990). The use of slow motion, instant replays, on-screen graphics, and the provision of verbal statistics are far more pronounced in the coverage of men’s games. Mixed and contradictory messages, such as verbal and visual depiction of female athletes combining positive and flattering portrayals with subtly negative suggestions, trivialize and undermine the sports performance (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988). Images showing female athletes accompanied by a verbal description focusing on a male performance are also ambivalent. When, for example, Grete Waitz crossed the finish line to win the New York marathon, the TV commentator’s attention focused on who had finished third in the men’s race. The media often perceive and construct female athletes as objects of sexual desire (Birell & Theberge 1989, Duncan 1990). This is mainly achieved by emphasizing physical appearance, showing athletes in submissive body positions or poses resembling those of soft-core pornography, concentrating on emotional displays and using camera angles that look down on women, symbolizing their inferior position. As a consequence, the female competitors portrayed the most effectively are the ones competing in sports such as ice skating, swimming, etc., which are traditionally defined as feminine. A study focusing on the analysis in Finland’s largest newspaper of sports to which women are relatively newcomers, such as boxing, ski jumping, hammer throwing, triple jump and pole vault, was published last year (Pirinen 1997). The analysis focuses on trivialization and marginalization. The women’s boxing championship final was described as “dancing in emptiness”, and the director of the Finnish national ski jumping team minimized the importance of the national record jump of Tiina Lehtola, saying that “it was such an unnerving experience for her that she gave up the sport there and then”.

Consequences
The consequences that media coverage of women’s sports can have for girls and women in sport, and in general, are of the greatest importance. The under-reporting of women’s sport by the media can easily result in the “symbolic annihilation” of the female athlete (Creedon 1994, Birell and Theberge 1994). The female athlete has less value in society compared to male athletes. As a result, many top-level female athletes, whose looks seem to be more important than their performances, have difficulties obtaining sponsorship. As a more serious consequence, media coverage today may signal that sport is not for women and thereby reduce women’s recruitment in sport. Therefore, the way female athletes are currently presented by the media may be seen as an impediment to women’s involvement in sport, par-
particularly at top level and in sports that traditionally have been considered as “masculine”.

The paradox is that while participation in sports can empower women, the way they are presented in the media can “disempower” them because of the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in which women are considered the “weaker sex”.

Changing the situation

However, presentation of women’s sport in the media has slightly increased over the past few years. The extensive coverage of female athletes’ achievements during the Olympic Games in 1996 may have proved a breakthrough leading toward a more accurate and equitable presentation of women’s sports. The author of a study recently conducted in the USA suggests that the impetus behind the growth of interest in women’s sports is money (Fink 1998). Women in the USA earn more than $1 trillion annually and make 80% of all retail purchases (Lopiano 1997: MediaMark Research 1995, in Fink 1998). In addition, there are more female than male participants in five of the seven major fitness activities, and the interest of women in lifetime sporting activities such as golf is growing.

Another explanation may be “consciousness-raising”, the development of which is largely dependant on international sports organizations. For example, several years ago the women’s committee of the Norwegian Confederation of Sports organized, with the cooperation of the Norwegian Organization of Sports Journalists, two seminars aiming at increasing and improving the quality of female sports coverage in the media. It has been noticed that, as a result, some of the most famous Norwegian sports journalists have focused on women’s rights and equality in sports, Representation of women involved in new sports is also improving.

Many of the Norwegian sports federations are dissatisfied with the media coverage of women’s sports and are undertaking actions to change the situation. For example, the Norwegian national football federation called a press conference before the opening of the female football league to discuss issues concerning the media coverage of the event. Another action, which will hopefully have a larger impact, is the federation’s contract with the two major TV channels, stipulating that each of the channels must transmit one women’s match during the season. This would have probably never happened if the federation had not demanded it.

It is reasonable to believe that male and female journalists differ in their coverage of women’s sports. But, as the world of sports journalism is still heavily dominated by men, an active policy in employing more women sports journalists could lead to an encouraging change in the way women’s sport is portrayed by the media.

*Professor, The Norwegian University of Sports and Physical Education.

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**Seminar in Cyprus**

On 27 and 28 March 1999, a national seminar on women and sport was organized in Nicosia, Cyprus, by the Cyprus Olympic Committee with the cooperation and support of the IOC. Twenty-five participants directly involved in the development of women’s sport in Cyprus attended the seminar. The keynote speaker was Professor Margaret Talbot from Leeds Metropolitan University in Great Britain. In her capacity as president of the International Association for Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) and an expert in the field of women in sport, Professor Talbot helped the participants to assess the current situation and plan action strategies to further enhance the advancement of women through sport and physical activity.