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Mainstreamed and Marginalized: Female Athletes as the “Other” in International Sport Media Coverage

Abstract: Western media critics have long observed that female athletes seldom receive more than a minimal amount of media coverage devoted to sport, due in large part to the masculine hegemony that pervades the sport industry. In the US and other Western countries, men’s sports are overwhelmingly privileged in nearly all media contexts. Consequently, female athletes have been accustomed to being marginalized, sexualized, and, in some cases, rendered invisible by media outlets as they are situated as the “Other” in the press. According to feminist critics, sport normalizes men’s power, as evidenced by the media’s tendency to highlight women’s physical attractiveness and marital status rather than their athletic skills. Increasingly, male privilege and bias are manifested through commentary intended to differentiate men’s and women’s sports rather than through blatant gendered stereotypes. The picture is not entirely bleak, however, with some increased media attention devoted to women’s sports in audience-driven televised events like the Olympics, the World Cup, and professional tennis and golf tournaments; however, these are the exceptions. This article explores the sometimes paradoxical relationship between women’s sport and “Otherness,” whereby women can be both mainstreamed and marginalized in contemporary popular media.

Keywords: athletes, football, gender, media, soccer, sport

Western media critics have long observed that female athletes seldom receive more than a minimal amount of the media coverage devoted to sport, due in large part to the masculine hegemony that pervades sport and sport coverage. In the US and in many European countries, men’s sports are overwhelmingly privileged in nearly all contexts. Consequently, female athletes have been accustomed to being marginalized, sexualized, and, in some cases, rendered invisible by media outlets as they are situated as the “Other” in sport. Their otherness is manifested both quantitatively and qualitatively in the amount of coverage received (or lack thereof), and in the descriptors used to talk about sports, as is blatantly obvious in the nomenclature “women’s” sport.

According to feminist critics (Duncan 1990; Daddario 1994; Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt 2000; Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015), sport normalizes men’s power and privilege as evidenced by the media’s tendency to highlight women’s physical

attractiveness rather than their athletic skills. Increasingly, gender bias in sport is manifested through differential commentary used to characterize male and female athletes rather than through blatant gendered stereotypes.

Despite the overall disparity in sports coverage, women have achieved close to parity and, in some instances, have even exceeded it in terms of participation in global sporting events. The 2015 World Cup, for example, expanded from sixteen to twenty-four teams, and just under half of the athletes at the 2018 Winter Olympics were women. In terms of airtime, women athletes received about 52% of the coverage in NBC's telecasting of the Pyeongchang Games (Marchand 2018). As the Olympics researcher Billings acknowledges, "it's really a huge difference compared to any other form of sports media" (cited in Studebaker 2018). There was a similar trend for both the 2016 Rio Games and the 2012 London Games. Similarly, by Western standards, the 2015 World Cup enjoyed unprecedented media coverage and audience interest. In fact, the US telecast of the Women's World Cup final was the "most watched soccer game" (Sandomir 2015). According to a 2014 ESPN poll, soccer ranked second only to the National Football League (NFL) in popularity among younger adult viewers (Longman 2015).

However, despite the increased attention devoted to some of women's sport, audience-driven spectacles like the Olympics and World Cup tend to be the exceptions. Using studies conducted in the US as well as in several European countries, this paper explores the paradoxical relationship between women's sport and "otherness," whereby women can be both mainstreamed and marginalized in the popular sports press. The paper will begin by considering some of the universalities in how the media cover women athletes across sports and across countries. While I will consider several sports, this section looks primarily at the coverage of women's football, due to its pervasiveness and popularity in Western and Eastern European culture. Common characteristics were derived from studies conducted on media coverage in the US, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Poland.

1 Universalities

Studies reveal that coverage of women's sports falls between 5% and 10% of all sports coverage, regardless of medium and/or country. A recent longitudinal study conducted in the US by Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015) found that network television coverage of female athletes has declined over the years from 5% to approximately 3% of all sports coverage. Within these narrow parameters, when the media do cover sport, they tend to favour women's basketball and

tennis. Lack of coverage, unfortunately, is a universality shared by female athletes in other countries, where they fail to fare much better. In a study on Polish mass media (Jakubowska 2015), only 10 % of newspaper coverage was extended to women, with the majority of that coverage awarded to women in individual sports. By way of context, individual sports, such as swimming, gymnastics, skiing, and figure skating, among several others, have traditionally been framed as feminine sports because they are perceived as less overtly competitive or confrontational than team sports, which historically have been constructed as masculine. Outside of basketball, rarely is coverage extended to women’s team sports, specifically women’s football (not counting World Cup years). Accordingly, when it is covered, it is offered as a kind of “peculiarity” in comparison to men’s football (Jakubowska 2015, 173).

Ironically, football continues to be framed in a paradoxical manner in the US. Football was introduced in other countries as a men’s sport and, according to Pfister (2015a), as an opportunity to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity and male superiority. For example, she argues that it was implemented in English schools to “discipline unruly boys” (Pfister 2015b, 640). Participation was eventually (and often reluctantly) extended to women due, in part, to the example set by female players in the US, who demonstrated that “perseverance, aggressiveness and technical as well as tactical skills were not just a men’s preserve” (640). Soccer was introduced in US play culture as a recreational sport for school-aged boys and girls. Consequently, one might assume that, without the long tradition of men’s participatory dominance in a particular sport, media coverage might be more egalitarian, as is the case with tennis, swimming, or even track and field; however, that assumption would be erroneous.

In a study conducted on the German popular press, Pfister (2015b) observed that less than 10 % of newspaper and broadcast sports coverage is devoted to women’s sport. When sport is covered, it also tends to focus on individual sports, such as tennis and skiing. A 1980 study of the German tabloid *BILD Zeitung* found more coverage on “WAGS” (wives and girlfriends of athletes) than sportswomen (cited in Pfister 2015b, 641). These findings are commensurate with a previous study I conducted on photographic coverage of women in *Sports Illustrated* magazine: I found the magazine extended more coverage to female swimsuit models and non-athletes, such as wives and girlfriends, than to female athletes (Daddario 1992). A study on the United Kingdom press found that women receive approximately 7 % of newspaper sports coverage (Bernstein 2002). Falling slightly behind is the Netherlands, where coverage is around 5 % (Peeters and Elling 2015). Ironically, the data on Dutch media coverage dates back only to 2003, the year in which journalists started covering women’s sports. Surprisingly, not even two decades ago, coverage of women’s sport in journalism was essentially non-existent.

Another universality shared by women's sports coverage is the tendency to marginalize athletes' participation by situating them as the "Other." Marginalization can be imposed in a number of ways, including such rhetorical devices as gender-marking, stereotyping, and minimizing female athletes' abilities by focusing on their heterosexual appeal. Gender-marking, as a dismissive strategy, transcends geographical borders, for women's sports are literally referred to as "women's" sports everywhere and with specificity, from women's football in Europe to women's soccer in the US. In the United Kingdom, women's participation is always gender-marked by using "women's" and "girls" as a prefix to all sports (Caudwell 2011, 324). Infantilizing women can be a form of gender-marking too, as in Germany, where women football athletes are referred to as "our girls," "gorgeous girls," and even "prima ballerinas" (Pfister 2015b, 646). Both forms are used in the US, as evident in the acronym "LPGA" used for the Ladies Professional Golf Association and in a reference to soccer player Carly Loyd and her "Jersey girl feistiness" (Macur 2015).

Another way to marginalize women is to emphasize their domestic roles as girlfriends, wives, and mothers. A study on the Dutch sports media spanning twenty years observed that identifying women as mothers trivializes them as athletes (Peeters and Elling 2015). As a result of this duality being invoked, women will inevitably be perceived as mothers first, athletes second. Similarly, the German study found numerous human-interest stories woven around players, including one about an athlete who "wanted to marry, have children and open a beauty salon" (Pfister 2015b, 647). A preoccupation with beauty can be seen in the US, where the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) offers a session about make-up application and fashion in its orientations for new players (Dockterman 2014).

Similarly, in a study on female footballers in the US, scholars argue that the narratives of strong female athletes are often undermined by depictions of them as "mothers and beauty queens" (Kristiansen, Pedersen, and Broch 2014, 7). The longitudinal US study cited earlier observed that, while there are far fewer stories overtly sexualizing athletes, the media continue to position athletes as mothers, wives, or girlfriends (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). In a study on British newspapers, researchers found that trends have changed in terms of what is reported (i. e. that female athletes are treated in a less gendered fashion), but not in terms of how much is reported (cited in Pfister 2015b, 642).

2 Masculine sport hegemony

A final universality shared by sports cultures is the construction of sport as a male preserve or as one of the “last male domains” that embraces masculine hegemony (Pfister 2015b, 646). As Pfister notes: “All over the world media sports play an important part in people’s everyday lives, but it is men’s sports that is at the centre of public interest” (2015b, 639). These centres are seen as contested sites; for example, if women encroach at all on a male domain, the responsibility is on them to conform or make the necessary adaptations that are encouraged, even demanded, by sports patriarchy. As one German columnist noted: “I’m used to speed and muscle power on the field. The female body is just not good enough for football” (cited in Pfister 2015b, 645). This kind of commentary refocuses on the feminine, or what Pfister describes as “drawing the readers’ attention to what’s considered female behavior, such as using make-up and shopping” (648), as the media help force women to comply with traditional gender norms.

Accordingly, if women wish to receive sustained media coverage, “they must conform to the stereotypical conceptions of femininity which prevail in the world of Western media” (Pfister 2015b, 650). We can see masculine hegemony at work in magazines and websites such as *Playboy*, *FHM*, the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, *ESPN’s Body Issue*, and others. For example, the 1980s figure skater Katarina Witt, swimmer Amanda Beard, and most recently soccer player Ali Krieger are among the many athletes who have posed nude or nearly nude for *Playboy* or *ESPN’s Body Issue*. Just prior to the 2011 World Cup, several players from the German national team posed for an erotic photo shoot in *German Playboy*.

Athletes, especially Olympians who excel in sports rarely seen outside of the four-year Olympic cycle, have posed naked to garner what they argue is media attention for their under-exposed sports and to gain financial benefit for themselves. Lolo Jones, Olympic hurdler turned bobsleighter, offered this apologetic in the ESPN documentary *Branded*: “I have a chance to get sponsors every four years, and that money has to last. If you know anything about the Olympics, in between – those four years in between – it’s like the desert [financially speaking]” (cited in Dockterman 2014). Scholars refer to this compliance as the “feminine apologetic” (Knight and Giuliano 2003, 273), whereby female athletes who are athletically powerful on the field are required by societal norms to be particularly feminine off the field. This duality makes athleticism and feminism more palatable to both spectators and the press. It constructs a gendered state with which people can identify, as it tends to favour displays of “sociability, receptiveness and passivity” (Kristiansen, Pedersen, and Broch 2014, 9) along with the occasional display of athletic force and power. Furthermore, this duality reinforces the positioning of men as dominant and women as “Other.” And, according to Caudwell,

this cultural and historical nexus operates to “affirm and reaffirm men’s and boys’ ‘entitlement’ to the game” (2011, 323).

A telling example occurred during the 1999 Women’s World Cup when David Letterman (formerly of the *Late Show*) screened a photo every night of the US team standing shoulder-to-shoulder in *Late Show* T-shirts looking like what Jere Longman (1999) of the *New York Times* referred to as “beauty contestants.” Superimposed on the screen were the words “Soccer Mamas,” (an attempt to appropriate the iconic nomenclature “Soccer Moms” and, of course, to sexualize it). Longman observed that the US players had “sent a message around the world that women can be both athletic and feminine in an endeavor that, in many countries, still carries the stigma that women who play are somehow unwomanly.”

This assumption clearly illustrates the notion of masculine hegemony through the players’ willingness to showcase themselves within a heteronormative context; obviously, the pairing of athleticism with femininity has become so normalized within sports culture that athletes, audiences, and the mass media see the intersection as natural and women’s participation in it as voluntary and compliant. Specific gender-markings within the heteronormative environs of sport include having a ponytail, posing semi-clad or even nude, and, of course, being seen with a husband or boyfriend. This hegemonic phenomenon occurs in other countries as well, as Pfister notes: in Germany during the 2011 World Cup, the motto selected for the tournament by the German Football Federation was “20eleven from its most beautiful side,” which conveyed “the impression that ‘beauty’ played an important role in women’s football” (Pfister 2015b, 645). Accordingly, sexual innuendo was “rife” in the 2011 World Cup, where players were described as “sexy” and “clear allusions” were made to their sexuality (647).

Not only are female athletes positioned as the “Other” in sports; women who do not conform to the stereotypical notions of heterosexual attractiveness are positioned as outside the “Other” (or even other than “Other”). If a female athlete is hypersexualized, she has some chance of garnering favour with the press. If she is seen at all as unattractive or as a lesbian (traditionally considered “unattractive”), or as someone who does not confirm to heteronormality in any way, she is further marginalized. Athletes become fairly easy targets for the press to render invisible by casting doubt on their sexuality if they appear to push or transgress the heterosexual boundaries.

The media coverage of the 2015 World Cup had a difficult time reconciling the image of US goalkeeper Hope Solo as “one of the girls.” While she conformed to heterosexual standards of attractiveness (with, yes, her ponytail), her record of domestic violence, where she was the perpetrator rather than the victim, in a kind of US football role-reversal, placed her in a hegemonic paradox. According to one article, “U.S. soccer now has a woman in goal who is accused of saying

and doing some very ugly things – not exactly the kind of poster woman you’d want for a team” (Macur 2015). The commentator further described her as a player who “brings trouble to the team” due to her anti-feminine and -feminist behaviour.

Just a year later, the US Soccer Federation terminated the contract of Hope Solo for what it called “conduct that is counter to the organization’s principles” and suspended her from the team (Das 2016). After being defeated in a penalty shoot-out with the Swedish team in the quarter-finals at the 2016 Summer Olympics, Solo referred to her opponents as “cowards” for their conservative playing tactics. Of course, the fallout from this slur was compounded by Solo’s previous legal troubles, which included not only the domestic assault charge (which was later dropped) but the arrest of her husband for driving under the influence in a borrowed team van.

The ways in which women have been portrayed as the “Other” in sport tend to be universal across both sport and country of origin. For example, women’s heterosexual attractiveness has been an issue in almost all sports – from basketball to tennis, and in almost all contexts – from the Olympics to the World Cup. Ironically, another way both press and fans marginalize women and appropriate their sexuality is by referring to them with the names of revered male athletes. For example, according to an article in the *New York Times*, “anyone watching [a French match] is likely to hear France’s best player referred to as the female Zidane or Sweden’s star forward Schelin as the female Ibrahimovic, the dominant player on her country’s team” (Mather 2015). According to Miedema of the Netherlands, who is often called the female Robben, “it’s really cool to be compared to him, but as a woman, it’s a bit strange” (quoted in Mather 2015). The US’s Foudy, who played in the 1999 World Cup, agrees that because of the dominance of men’s soccer on television, the comparisons are inevitable (see Mather 2015). Thus, women cannot even be famous in their own gender.

Probably the ultimate mode of marginalizing women came prior to the 2015 World Cup and from its own international governing body, which literally refused to level the playing field for women when it required they play on artificial turf rather than the grass turf which the men play on, thus putting the women at greater risk of injury. A group of women players representing thirteen countries sued FIFA for gender discrimination but later withdrew their suit.

FIFA marginalizes women further through the disparity in the prize money awarded to the winning men’s and women’s teams. As an illustration, the 2014 World Cup champions, Germany, received a \$35 million bonus prize while the 2015 women’s team won a \$2 million bonus. Salary and bonus inequities do not end here, as women, at least in the US, earn far less than men earn during a regular soccer season, peaking at \$30,000 per season. Women in Germany earn less

than half of that. In fact, minimum salaries for males can hover in the \$60,000 range while women's minimum salaries can be about one tenth of that (Phippen 2016).

In the aftermath of the 2015 World Cup, five US soccer players filed a complaint accusing the US Soccer Federation of wage discrimination. As stated, the disparity between male and female players is vast. As another example, if a US men's team wins a match, each player can win just over \$17,000; in the event of a women's win, each player earns less than \$1,700. Men earn over three times that if they lose a match. The filing claimed that women have produced \$20 million more in revenue than men. The federation counter-argued the opposite: that the men's team generates higher revenue overall as well as higher ratings on television and higher attendance at games. The suit was resolved in 2017 when the women's team received a wage increase in a collective bargaining agreement with the US Soccer Federation. While it was not quite on a par with men's wages, they did receive a 30 % pay increase and improved winning bonuses.

3 Where the road divides

As the literature reveals, there is little difference between the US and European countries when it comes to the frequency with which mainstream media cover women's sports; typically, the coverage comprises between 5 % and 10 % of all coverage. Further, there appears to be little qualitative difference in how each country's media industries report on sports. The press in all the countries covered in the review of literature in this article privileges men's sports by positioning women as the "Other." Further, it engages in at least one of the following modes of marginalization: gender-marking sports; portraying female athletes in ancillary or non-athletic roles as wives, mothers, and girlfriends; privileging femininity and heterosexual attractiveness; encouraging athletes' compliance with a masculine sports hegemony; and many others.

The above focuses on sports in general. However, sometimes countries can differ depending on the particular sport. The remainder of this paper revolves specifically around the sport of football or soccer as a site of contested terrain where women athletes are portrayed as both mainstreamed and marginalized. According to most critics, when it comes to football, female athletes tend to be treated more inclusively by the press in countries such as the US and Sweden, where soccer is not a dominant men's sport. Of course, this has a flip side, so to speak: since it is not a dominant men's sport, it seldom gets coverage of any kind outside of World Cup games.

Conversely, female athletes tend to be marginalized by the media in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, where men’s football reigns supreme. Sporting cultures privilege men’s football by promoting it as the norm and women’s football as deviant or as the “Other” (and sometimes the “invisible Other” at that). For example, none of the newspaper articles in the Polish study covered the women’s games either at home or at the 2011 Women’s World Cup (Jakubowska 2015). In Germany, there is also little coverage, for most reports favour individual sports (read “more feminine” sports) like tennis and skiing. In the Netherlands, women’s participation in football was seen as devaluing men’s games. However, according to a *New York Times* article published during the 2015 World Cup, increased opportunities abound for women in England due in part to support from Prince William, the Football Association, and men’s stars like David Beckham (“Reaching Women’s World Cup Semifinals is Progress for England” 2016). Of course, one cannot help but note that the agents “allowing” women’s football to grow are all part of the sports patriarchy.

Pfister (2015b) observes that the Olympics and the World Cup, the latter introduced for women in 1991, attract atypical media attention. Despite the temporary focus on women’s football, according to one of the newspapers in the study, over half (52%) of Germans could not name a single female player (Pfister 2015b, 649). In striking contrast is the US women’s soccer team and *Sports Illustrated*’s unprecedented move to “honor” (their term) the entire team of twenty-three players and one coach with their own personal magazine covers. Including the team picture, there were twenty-five covers in total. Similarly, in the aftermath of the 1999 World Cup, Wheaties allocated five of its boxes to photographs of the top players.

Despite the microbursts of media coverage during World Cup years, women’s soccer in the US is under-represented in the press despite their superior performance to the US men on the soccer field. While the US women’s team enjoyed a ranking of 2 in the 2017 FIFA table, the men’s team was ranked at 23. The divide was even greater in the 2018 table, with the US women at number 1 and the men at 24. Looking more closely at the state of soccer in the US, women tend to be both mainstreamed and marginalized. They are certainly mainstreamed every four years, at least since the onset of women’s participation in the 1991 World Cup; they have won three World Championships and regularly finish much higher than the US men. In fact, the women’s final game had the highest number of viewers ever for a soccer game, at 26 million (Longman 2015). As some critics have deduced, women’s soccer is the closest thing the US has to a national team, not too dissimilar to the European men’s teams referenced earlier, which dominate their countries’ collective sporting imaginations. Further, as *New York Times* sports writer Longman (2015) observed, due in large part to the 2015 World Cup,

“soccer has become the sport by which Americans most passionately express their patriotism.”

Ultimately, it comes down to what Cooky (cited in Rhoden 2015) refers to as a male-dominated sports media culture. Despite the increased participation in women’s sports, “advertiser revenue is tied to viewer ratings, and ratings are shaped by media coverage.” In summary, sports have to be covered year-round and not just for two weeks every four years to attract both viewers and advertisers.

4 Conclusion

As we can see, women are in a sports media conundrum. In countries where men’s football dominates the media and the collective imaginations of spectators, women’s football is often overlooked, marginalized, and/or trivialized. However, in countries such as the US, where men’s soccer does not enjoy a long-standing paradigmatic tradition, women’s football is still overlooked, marginalized, and/or trivialized (except, of course, during Olympic and World Cup years). Consequently, women’s sports get trumped in the media by either men’s sports or essentially no sports. Women’s sports seem to lose every time (except, of course, when they are literally winning).

As suggested in this paper, there is no easy solution to the question of how to raise the media profile of, and fan respect for, women’s football. Obviously, a paradigm shift within the various governing bodies and media agencies will need to occur to increase players’ salaries and their visibility within the press. Additionally, audience and media enthusiasm for women’s sport needs to continue between the World Cup and Olympic years. If the press regularly covers women’s sport, particularly women’s football, viewers and advertisers will follow.

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