

Title IX legislation passed in 1972 with the intent of banning gender discrimination in school. Its effect on athletics was not originally considered, but would prove to have a lasting impression on college athletics in the following years. As Huffman, Tuggle, and Rosegard explain, “male and female athletes are expected to have equal access to equipment and practice facilities, coaches of the same quality, and, at the college level, scholarship money proportional to participation” under Title IX (2004, p. 476). Since the passing of Title IX in 1972, the number of female athletes and the coverage of these athletes have skyrocketed. For example, the Women’s Sports Foundation reports that “female collegiate participation has increased by 456%” since Title IX’s inception (“Title IX”). Even so, the quantity of coverage given to female athletes has yet to reach a comparable level of their male counterparts as seen in the amount of space devoted to their coverage, subscribing to apologetic defense, and the dominant narrative themes that pervade coverage of women’s athletics.

Researchers found that not-for-profit publications, which include *NCAA News* and university’s athletic department websites, have seen a noticeable improvement in the amount of coverage of female collegiate athletes. For example, Cunningham, Sagas, Sartore, Amsden, & Schellbase found that the *NCAA News* gave women 42.4% of the coverage, which was a 15.9% increase from a decade ago (Cunningham et al., 2004, p. 866). However there still is cause for concern, as a disparity between genders still exists. A study that examined the websites of schools in major NCAA conferences uncovered that male athletes still received a majority of the overall coverage – 64.5 percent to be exact (Cooper, 2009). Even more troubling was that women’s athletics only garnered 2.5 percent of the multimedia coverage on these websites (Cooper, 2009). “With female

NCAA participation rates on the rise, these results are a concern because they seem to indicate that athletic departments are not willing to afford female athletes with promotional opportunities equal to their coinciding NCAA participation rates” (Cooper, 2009, p. 25). Previously, not-for-profit media outlets were obviously unequal in coverage by gender. If organizations that were supposed to promote the equality of college athletics could not provide equal coverage to both genders, it doesn’t come as a surprise that for-profit publications do not represent both genders fairly since for-profit media outlets must abide by consumer demand.

A study by Huffman et al. examined how college newspapers covered men and women’s athletics looking at both the quantity and quality devoted to each gender, thinking that college newspapers might approach gender differently than professional media because the student journalists grew up with Title IX. Their research found that men’s athletics composed 72.7 percent of college newspapers’ sports stories and college television dedicated 81.5 percent of its airtime for sports to men’s athletics (Huffman et al.). The researchers did note that when covered, women’s athletics received the same quality of coverage as their male counterparts, but “the huge disparity in the quantity of coverage indicates that campus media mirror professional media in regard to gender equity in their coverage of sports” (Huffman et al., 475). Since researchers started examining the coverage of both genders’ sports, there has been a visible gap in for-profit media outlets.

Commercial media publications have yet to cover athletics for each gender in an equivalent fashion in terms of quantity. A content analysis of the *Sports Illustrated* covers from 1990 through 1999 found that the magazine’s cover did not accurately represent the

increase of women participating in athletics (Redmond & Ridinger, 2009). When female athletes were featured on the cover, more often than not it was of a female tennis player “depicted in sexually appealing ways” (Redmond & Ridinger, 2009, p. 80). In examining the *Sports Illustrated*’s online vault, which features an image of each and every *SI* cover since the magazine’s inception, one can see the obvious disparity. In reviewing the covers over a two-year span from Jan. 1, 2007, through Jan. 1, 2009, one can note that just four issues featured women on the cover – two of which were the annual swimsuit issue (“*Sports Illustrated Covers*”). One issue, which featured six different regional covers, depicted a male and female basketball player from the same school in an action shot on the cover for the 2008 college basketball preview. As a result, *Sports Illustrated* had just one issue out of 104 with a female athlete – Indy driver Danica Patrick – on the cover. The problem is that this May 19, 2008, cover didn’t even depict Patrick in an action shot. Instead, she sat with her hands folded over her helmet sitting in front of her so that it appeared feminine without being a full-blown glamour shot. These observations from a small, two-year sample appear to fall in line with the content analysis of *SI* covers from 1990 through 1999 and demonstrate that sport publications continue to ignore the rise in women’s athletics.

Redmond & Ridinger performed a content analysis of ESPN.com’s coverage of the 2007 NCAA men’s and women’s basketball tournaments. Unsurprisingly, ESPN.com’s main page showcased less feature photographs of female basketball players and coaches and saw less links to the women’s basketball sub page than their male counterparts (Redmond & Ridinger, 2009). Only top-ranked women’s basketball teams or big rivalry games made the main page, while lesser-ranked men’s teams could also be

found on the front page. In addition, the researchers noted the links to the respective sub pages were unequal with the “College Basketball” link sending visitors to the men’s basketball sub page, while the “Women’s Basketball” link forwarded visitors to the women’s basketball sub page (Redmond & Ridinger, 2009). By referring to men’s college basketball simply as college basketball, it trivializes the women’s college basketball tournament and places their competition on a lower tier. Kian, Vincent, and Mondello explain, “men’s basketball was, therefore, framed as the standard, whereas women’s basketball was marginalized as ‘the other’” (Kian et al., 2008, p. 237). However on a positive note, female basketball players were just as likely as male basketball players to be depicted in an action shot and the article’s length on the respective sub pages were similar in scope (Redmond & Ridinger, 2009). The Internet wasn’t the only place for these types of discrepancies, as they could also be found in the pages of print publications like *Sports Illustrated*.

The November 23, 2009, issue of *Sports Illustrated* previewed the upcoming 2009-10 college basketball season. The cover depicted a star player from various top-ranked men’s teams depending on the reader’s region (e.g. a Michigan State player made the cover in the Midwest region) and listed the top 10-ranked men and women’s basketball teams. This annual issue usually includes the most coverage of female athletes, on average, but it still falls short when compared to the coverage given to the men. For example, *Sports Illustrated* took a more in-depth look at the top 20-ranked men’s basketball teams, giving each of those squads two pages of coverage in the issue. While the women’s top 10 teams are ranked on the cover, there is no corresponding team-by-team preview inside the issue for women’s basketball. The issue also includes an

additional article on the importance of a lockdown defender in men's college basketball and another article looking at the historical 1966 run by Texas Western, which was the first men's basketball team to start five African American players in the NCAA championship game over an all-white Kentucky team. In addition, *SI* included a feature piece on the top-ranked men and women's basketball teams – Connecticut and Stanford respectively – in their preseason preview, but the article on Connecticut is slightly longer. Just in this *SI* issue alone, it's easy to see how men's college basketball receives greater coverage than the women's programs.

Despite the advances since the passing of Title IX, it appears that the media – and sometimes the athletes themselves -- still feels compelled to conform female athletes to traditional gender role representations to fully showcase their femininity. This concept is what researchers have referred to as the apologetic defense, which is a “coping strategy that allows a woman to compensate for the perceived masculinizing effect of participating in sports by exaggerating her femininity” (Malcom, 2003, p. 1388).

Apologetic defense occurs when female athletes overemphasize their femininity by wearing overtly feminine clothing (e.g. makeup, dresses, frilly blouses), stress their heterosexual relationships (e.g. boyfriend, husband, children), and try to downplay the aggressive and physical nature of playing their sport with the hopes of counteracting the perceived masculinity that is associated with involvement in athletics (Malcom, 2003).

Some research has found that female athletes employ the apologetic defense because of a “fear of being labeled a lesbian” (Malcom, 2003, p. 1388). This reasoning becomes clear when leagues like the WNBA and LPGA hire fashion consultants to promote their

athletes as heterosexual and feminine because of the fear that they are being stereotyped as lesbian sports and the worry that it impacts their bottom line (Hargreaves, 2000).

As a result of this apologetic defense, the media tends to play along and includes stereotypical tidbits into articles when one would rarely see those anecdotes in a similar feature on a male athlete. For example, *Sports Illustrated* included a feature piece on the top-ranked men and women's basketball teams – Connecticut and Stanford respectively – in their preseason preview in the Nov. 23 issue. The article about Stanford's women's basketball team entitled "The Bigger The Better" initially talks about how the team has an abnormal amount of big players – the team's two forward starters and three forwards who come off the bench all range in height from 6'2" to 6'5" – and the impact that has on the team's play (Anderson, 2009). Seven paragraphs into the article written by Kelli Anderson, who is the only female reporter with a feature article in this issue of *SI*, the focus changes from the team's size to how All-America center Jayne Appel is "a walking billboard for the state's fair climate and fine beaches" and a teammate is quoted describing her as "a 6'4" Paris Hilton" (Anderson, 2009). The article continues on this thread – talking about Appel's plans after college, her extracurricular activities – before returning to talk about her scouting report, which only lasts four sentences. The reporter then returns to talk about Appel's hometown and family to round out Appel's part in the piece. One of the six dominant themes addressed by Kian et al. was found in this *Sports Illustrated* article.

The article in *Sociology of Sport Journal* by Kian et al. entitled "Masculine Hegemonic Hoops" points out the six dominant themes that emerged in the media coverage of the NCAA men and women's basketball tournaments, which tend to

trivialize female athletes and sometimes even exclude them. One of the narrative themes is included in the *SI* piece as it notes the “importance of fathers to female players’ successes” (Kian et al., 2008, p. 237). The *SI* article “The Bigger The Better” addressed the role her dad played in recognizing Appel’s talent and developing her passing and ambidextrous shooting skills that “her father, Joe, a lawyer who played hoops collegiately for St. Mary’s (in Moraga, Calif.) in the ’70s, drilled into her when he was her CYO coach” (Anderson, 2009). Rather than focus simply on Appel’s abilities on the court, the reporter felt compelled to explain how her talents were developed primarily because of her father’s dedication. It was the key male figure in her life that can be credited for her success, which simply trivializes her own athletic efforts and gains.

Tension exists along this fine line between the apologetic defense and the athlete just being who she really is as seen in a few *E:60* features from the last year and a half. *E:60* is an hour-long news magazine program on ESPN that offers a “combination of investigative features, profiles of intriguing sports personalities, and cutting edge stories on innovation in the sports world, including emerging sports and new technology” (“E:60 Fact Sheet”). Searching through the 115 *E:60* video segments dating back to September 30, 2008, on the program’s website, one can find only seven features with the primary focus on a female athlete. Those seven segments represent just 6.1 percent of the entire set. Of those videos, all of them fit the mold of the apologetic defense concept. The two fall 2009 features take a look at Anna Rawson as a model and a golfer and shows tennis star Maria Sharapova making over Matt Stafford, who was drafted No. 1 overall in the 2009 NFL Entry Draft by the Detroit Lions. One piece falls in line with the dominant narrative of the father’s role as she granted *E:60* her first television interview about

struggling to play basketball after her father passed away and how she is trying to honor his memory. Three video segments depict female athletes playing with the boys: a 13-year-old basketball phenom plays on an all boys team and the controversy surrounding that, Gina Carano's career in the MMA, and the daughters in the Force family and the dangers they face in the auto racing world (the longest of the seven segments coming in at 18:06 minutes). Each and every *E:60* piece falls in line with one of the six dominant themes Kian et al. identified in their study.

E:60's piece on Anna Rawson featured the 28-year-old LPGA rookie in both of her arenas – the runway and the golf course – during primetime on September 2, 2009 (“The Skin Game,” 2009). The clip reports that in February 2008, *Maxim* magazine named Rawson the sexiest new athlete and she recently joined GoDaddy as an endorser. In the segment, *USA Today* columnist Christine Brennan wonders, “It [Rawson’s provocative posing] might build interest in the game, but at what price?” A minute and 35 seconds into the piece, the voiceover describes the environment that Rawson and her older brother grew up in with a former Aussie-rules football star as a dad and a mother who committed suicide when they were little. After her mother’s sudden death, Rawson turned to sports to find comfort. When talking about Rawson’s college years at USC, the feature’s emphasis was on her partying, involvement in a sorority, and boys, which all proved to be a distraction for her on the golf course until her coach gave her an ultimatum. The feature’s focus then turned to how she integrated golf into her modeling and turned her career around. With five minutes left in the piece, *E:60* showed Rawson taking the male reporter into a clothing store and offering up some fashion tips on how to improve his wardrobe, which isn’t something you would expect to see a comparable male

athlete do in an *E:60* segment. *E:60* then turned to discuss the controversial remarks that Rawson made to an Australian radio show about how the LPGA isn't like it was 25 years ago when it was "full of a lot of dykes and unattractive females no one wanted to watch and it's totally changed." Golfer Christie Kerr, who sits atop the LPGA money list, told *E:60* that Rawson's comment almost sent the league back 20 years and Annika Sorenstam, a Hall of Fame golfer, said that her comments were "very inappropriate, especially from somebody so new to the tour." The profile also addressed that if she could improve her golf game and enter the top 50 on the LPGA, her career could know no bounds because she'd have talent to back up her attractive looks.

By comparison, *E:60* also profiled a female MMA athlete named Gina Carano in a 7:10-minute feature entitled "Serious Crush" that aired in primetime on September 30, 2008 ("Serious Crush," 2008). Growing up, she "always rough housed with the boys in the neighborhood" so her mother told *E:60* that "it didn't surprise me" when she started doing mixed martial arts. Her friend Kim Couture said in the interview that Carano "has always been a rebel, always been a tomboy," which goes along with the Kian et al. dominant theme that "she must have played with boys to get that good" (2008, p. 228). The video segment also fulfilled another of Kian et al.'s dominant narrative themes when the piece turned to how Carano had been "bred to be tough" as her father was the backup quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys, who said that "watching his daughter fight is a challenge." *E:60* then cites how she is doing financially as she now makes \$35,000 per fight two years after her MMA debut and she is even featured in EA's *Command and Conquer* video game, and was a star on the TV show *American Gladiators*. Tara LaRosa, arguably the top female fighter in the MMA, believes that women in the MMA who have

to use their sexuality to sell themselves are compensating for something and that the “skimpy, sexual side is disrespectful to the sport.” Unlike Rawson, Carano is not motivated by money as she comes from a well-to-do family and thus she has yet to “exploit” herself to the extent that Rawson has.

Both of these *E:60* profiles look at how these female athletes are using their sexuality to their advantage in their respective sports. It’s interesting to note that each of the video segments mentioned the athlete’s father as a sports star and his influence on her as a young girl. By crediting the father for his role in his daughter’s success, the comments trivialize the female athlete’s efforts. Both female athletes address how they may be one of the faces of their respective leagues despite their relative inexperience because of their sexuality and the problems that creates among fellow competitors and the public.

Kian et al. wrote, “Women who participate in sports considered to be more feminine generally receive far more media attention than those competing in sports construed as more masculine in nature, such as rugby and softball” (2008, p. 224). That statement helps to explain Rawson’s success away from the golf course while she struggles to perform well on the course. However it makes one wonder if the only reason for Carano’s success in the MMA, which is certainly a sport more masculine in nature than golf, is the extent to which she portrays her sexuality unlike some of her fellow female competitors who are unhappy with the amount of attention Carano receives. The *E:60* program is well-regarded for its reporting, camera work, and its ability to approach a story in a unique way or cover something no one else is really talking about so why is there such a low number of features on women’s athletics? Why do the pieces that they

have done seem to fit the mold for your stereotypical female athlete feature instead of *E:60*'s usual out-of-the-box segments?

While the coverage of women's athletics in both not-for-profit and commercial publications has certainly improved, the quantity of coverage given to female athletes has yet to reach a comparable level of their male counterparts as seen in the amount of space devoted to their coverage, subscribing to apologetic defense, and the dominant narrative themes that pervade coverage of women's athletics. As time goes on, sport participation levels will likely continue to increase for female athletes, but the question remains if the media coverage will ever improve to accurately reflect this trend in participation. Until then, it may be news magazine TV programs like *E:60* and online websites that get the word out about these female athletes with those likely receiving the bulk of the attention either at the top of their sport or the ones who best use their sexuality to market themselves and the sport.

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