

Women in Sports: Separate and Not Equal

by

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Introduction

In a recent assignment I asked my students to compare and contrast any one competitive sport that is available to professional players of both genders. Specifically, I have asked my students to discuss the similarities and differences in organization, pay structure, work conditions, celebrity status (e.g., highly sexy versus highly skilled), etc. between the men's and women's versions of the sport they identified. One of the most consistent justifications for the apparent lack of equality between men's and women's professional sports put forth by many of the respondents was that men's sports are faster, more aggressive and dynamic, and thus more exciting. Therefore, it was argued that until women can deliver the "same" level of play, discrepancies in pay, working conditions, and celebrity status are to be expected. Examples students used to demonstrate the performance differential between men's and women's sports included golf, tennis, basketball, volleyball, and soccer.

A Steady Growth in Numbers

The past three decades have witnessed a steady growth in women's sports programs in America along with a remarkable increase in the number of women athletes (NFHS 2003-04 High School Athletics Participation Survey, 2004) . As depicted in Chart 1 below, female participation in high school sports has sharply increased from 0.29 million participants in 1971-72 to 2.08 million by 1978. It then took 15 additional seasons before female participation in high school sports once again broke the 2.0 million mark. Since the 1993-94 season, female participation shows a steady growth from 2.13 to 2.86 million athletes. In comparison to male participation, females comprised 7.4 percent of all participants during the 1971-72 sport season. The percent of female participants quadrupled to 28.6 percent by the 1975-76 season. Starting in 1997, female high school athletes broke the 40 percent mark. Females have since maintained a slow but steady growth and by 2004 comprised 41.5 percent of high school athletes. Despite the very welcome gains in opportunities and an ever growing popularity of women's sports, the effects of a long tradition of gender bias in sports still persist. The steady and very significant growth in the number of female athletes and the new heights women have reached as competitors seem to have had little or no effect on the "male superiority ideology."

Chart 1

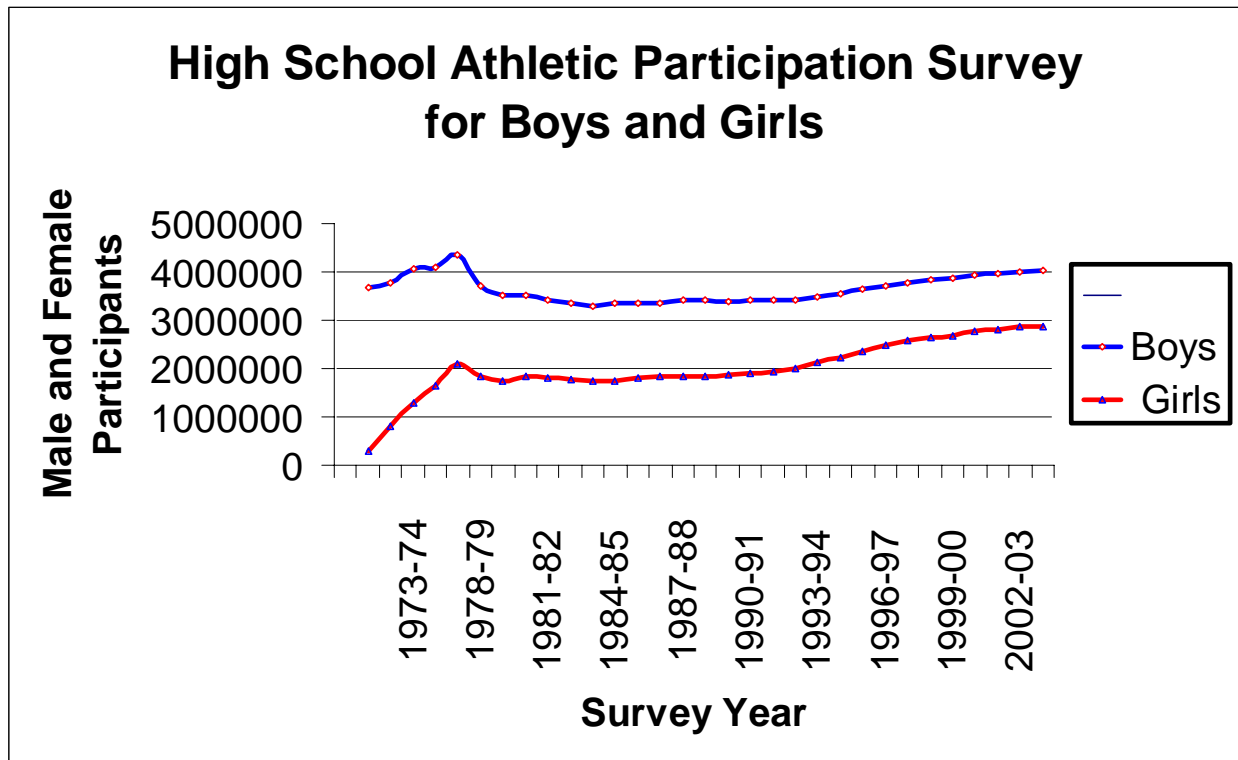


Chart is based on data provided by the NFHS 2003-04 High School Athletics Participation Survey (2004). Retrieved December 15, 2004 from http://www.nfhs.org/scriptcontent/VA_Custom/SurveyResources/2003_04_Participation_Summary.pdf

A Long Tradition of Gender Bias

Gender inequalities hark back to ancient Greece where in most city states, education, and physical education in particular, were offered exclusively to male citizens. Sparta was the sole exception where Lykourgos authored laws ordaining that Spartan virgins compete in foot races, wrestling, and the discus throw (Miller, 1991). Still, from the first known record of the ancient Olympic Games in 776 BCE until Theodosius the First's decree to terminate the games in 394 AD, women were marginalized by competing at the much less significant Hêraia Games (Smith, & Wayte, 1890).

Following a 1,500 year break the Olympic Games were revived in 1896. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics was a strong opponent of women's participation in the Games (Mechikoff & Estes, 2002). His aristocratic and religious beliefs led him to state that: "The solemn periodic manifestation of male sport based on internationalism, on loyalty as a means, on arts as a background and the applause of women as a recompense (CAAWS--ACAFS, 2004)."

A Persistent Marginalization of Women's Sports

The persistent marginalization of women's sports is well documented in a wide variety of studies and related statistics. For example, sport stories in USA Today, the Boston Globe, the Orange County Register, and the Dallas Morning were examined for the number of stories, size by column inches of stories, page placement of stories, number of photographs, and number of stories with photographs coverage devoted to men's and women's events. The data presented clearly demonstrated a vast statistical difference in the quantity, total number of column inches, and number of photographs when comparing newspaper reports on men's and women's athletics. Stories exclusively about men's sports were, on average, longer and appeared more often on the front page than those of women only (Duncan & Messener, 1994; Wilson, Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1991).

Researchers that surveyed the content of numerous issues in a variety of sport magazines came to the general conclusion that women's sport experiences were depicted in stereotypical gender roles and that women were often infantilized and/or depicted as sex objects (Duncan & Messener, 1994; Frankl & Hansen, 1999; Hilliard, 1984; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Rintala & Birrell, 1984; White & Gillett, 1994).

Gender Based Salary Discrepancies in Professional Sports

Despite a constant and gradual narrowing of the "muscle gap" (Messner, 1988) or performance differential between male and female top athletes, inequalities in the treatment of athletes still represent the norm rather than the exception. Consider, for example, the Skateboard Street at the X-Games that took place at Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles on August 5th & 6th, 2004. For the first time in history, women competitors also participated. Elissa Steamer, the female gold medalist was awarded a money prize of \$2,000.00 (Segovia, 2004) a sum that represented 1/25th of the \$50,000 awarded to Paul Rodriguez the winner of the gold medal in the men's event. This pay differential between male and female competitors persists along a wide range of sports. The prize money for the 2005 winter events of the Badger Beach Volleyball Series is set at \$1000.00 for the Men's Open and \$500.00 for the Women's Open. Out of an overall \$7,500.00 purse for the winning professional teams from around the Nation and World, \$6,500.00 were allocated for the Men's Pro Division and \$1,000.00 were allocated to the Women's Pro Division (Badger Volleyball, 2004).

Despite the popularity and strong commercial appeal of women's tennis, the Women's Sports Foundation (2004) reports that the average earnings of the top 10 (ATP and WTA Tour) tennis players for the years 1996 – 2000 was \$2,118,815.00 for males and \$1,434,632.00 for females. Top women tennis players earned 59 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. The average total purse available for that same period was \$63,031,000.00 for top men players and \$41,000,000.00 for top women players. While most tennis fans would agree that women's tennis is just as exciting as men's tennis (with a few exceptions on both sides of the net), some argue that the prize money differential may be justified by the fact that men face tougher competition and in

some tournaments are required to play five as contrasted to the women's maximum of three sets. What this form of rationalization fails to mention, however, is the fact that when Pete Sampras, Murat Safin, or Roger Federer won their matches in straight sets, they did not face a pay cut that would have been reflective of their “easy wins” or their opponent's “inferior” performance.

Other popular professional sports that enjoy strong fan support, i.e., bowling (PBA and WPBA Tour), golf (PGA and LPGA Tour), and Alpine Skiing (FIS World Cup) follow a similar trend to that seen in professional volleyball and tennis. The average earnings of the top 10 professional bowling athletes for the years 1996 – 2000 was \$130,969.00 for males and \$92,123.00 for females. Women bowlers earned 70 cents for every dollar earned by a male bowler. The total purse available for professional bowling for the years 1996-2000 was \$7,433,000.00 for males and \$2,278,000.00 for females. The average earnings of the top 10 professional golfers for the years 1996 – 2000 was \$2,196,000.00 for males and \$781,056.00 for females. Professional female golfers earned 36 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterpart. The average total purse available for professional golf for the years 1996-2000 was \$108,572,200.00 for males and \$32,817,400.00 for females. The average total purse available for Alpine Skiing for the years 1996-2000 was \$2,336,338.00 for males and \$1,907,864.00 for females (Women's Sports Foundation, 2004).

The greatest imbalance in pay structure, however, is displayed in the more “traditional male” sports, such as, basketball and soccer. The average salary in the NBA for the 1999-2000 season rose 20.5% from \$2.63 million in 1998-99 to \$3.17 million per player. During that same period rookie salaries for WNBA players ranged from \$27,000.00 to \$50,000.00 (Women's Sports Foundation, 2004). The average American male soccer player's salary is \$90,000.00 (Play Hard and Study Hard, 2003) but the top five players can make over \$300,000.00 per season and the top 16 players make over 200,000.00 per season (Mahoney, 2004). In contrast, professional female soccer players' salaries range between \$20,000.00 and \$40,000.00 while top players may be paid up to \$85,000.00 per year (Davidson, 1999; Page, 2001; Soccer Nova: Women's Soccer, 2004).

Making it to the Hall of Fame

Following an unparalleled career by any coach in any intercollegiate sport, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill women's soccer coach Anson Dorrance was named to the N.C. Sports Hall of Fame in 2005. Coach Dorrance's Tar Heels posted a record of 559-25-15 over a 25 year period that translates to a winning percentage of .946. Anson Dorrance's coaching record of 18 national championships in 23 seasons is so outstanding and unmatched that I find it just as amazing and a mystery that it took as long as it did to formally honor his genius. I suspect that the fact that he coached a women's as opposed to a men's team had something to do with this belated recognition.

Some Hope for a Brighter Future

Women have made constant strides forward in the modern Olympic Games. During the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles the women's marathon was first introduced. The 1996 Games in Atlanta saw the introduction of a women's only event—softball and the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics witnessed the US Women's Hockey team win its first gold at the debut of women's Olympic hockey. By the 2000 Olympics at Sydney, the hammer throw, the pole vault, synchronized diving, trampoline, and water polo were added as women's sports.

Ironically, recently males were barred from the stands while more than 750 female athletes from 23 different countries took part in the third “Muslim Women's Games” during the month of December, 2001. Muslim women who regularly wear the hijab competed in basketball, team handball, volleyball, and even wore swimming suits for the swimming events. This exclusively women-only sporting environment included an all-female support staff of coaches, trainers, referees and journalists. “The women taking part in the Muslim Women's Games were not pleading to play with the boys - they were creating a sports sphere to call their own (Murray, 2002).”

Despite major strides forward and constant improvements in the working conditions and the pay structure, gender inequalities in amateur and professional sports still remain. While gender bias in sports is a fairly straight forward issue, the forces that shape and contribute to the persistence of this bias are quite complex. Women's quest for self-expression, the ownership of their bodies, and equality, as suggested by Messner (1988), have created a sport milieu that is filled with contradictions and ambiguities.

Without major changes in our attitudes, regardless of actions women take, they will face bias that is fueled by the “male-defined institutions of organized sports (Messner, 1988, p. 198).” The suggestion that women should create a gender specific competitive environment as it is in women's gymnastics, for example, would further marginalize the status of female athletes. A reconstruction of game rules and equipment, therefore, will enhance rather than eradicate the existing perception of performance differential. Research examining the female bodybuilder culture has exposed the dilemma faced by the mostly male bodybuilding judges. How does one evaluate a woman bodybuilder that in so many ways looks exactly like a man (Lakoff & Scherr, 1984)? Thus, the stacking of WNBA athletes that can dunk the ball will still not satisfy the real issue of the traditional view of what is the “proper” mix of athletic prowess with a touch of femininity.

In order to promote change and move toward a sport culture and ideology that treats women athletes as equals to their men counterparts, physical educators, coaches, sport administrator, sports parents, and male and female athletes, will have to work together on re-educating first themselves, and then educating the public about the merits of an ideology of separate, different, and nevertheless equally worthy athletic competition. The application of the principles of multiculturalism and diversity to the sports milieu is well overdue.

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