

**MEDIA EDUCATION**  
FOUNDATION  
STUDY GUIDE



Challenging media

**PLAYING UNFAIR**

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THE MEDIA IMAGE OF THE FEMALE ATHLETE

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## PLAYING UNFAIR

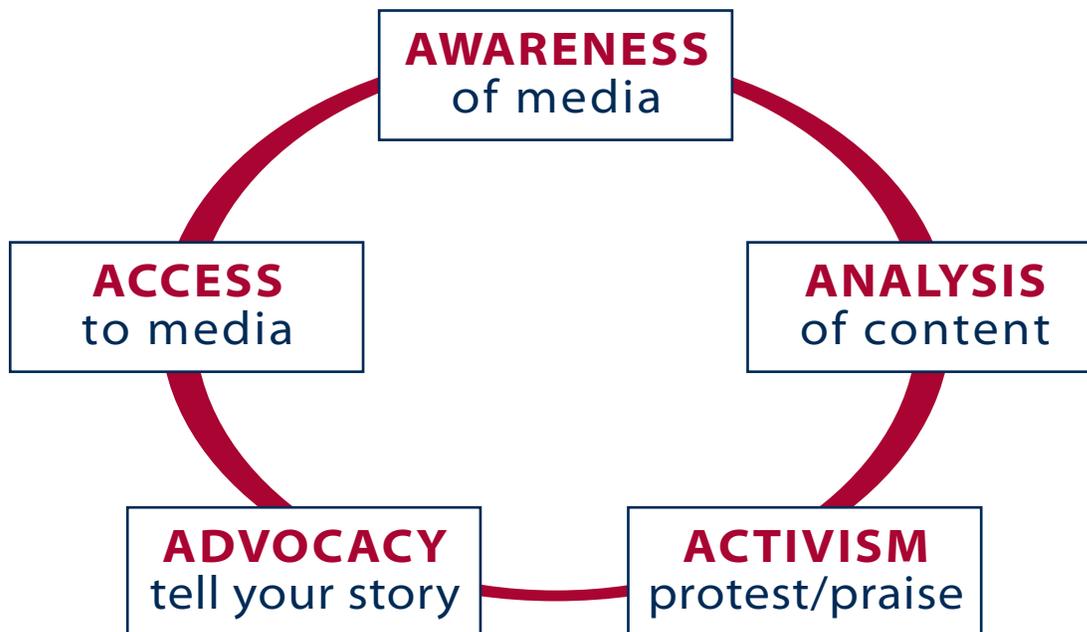
THE MEDIA IMAGE OF THE FEMALE ATHLETE

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# USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM

- » View the video prior to showing it to your students.
- » Review the study guide and choose which exercises you will use with your students.
- » Use the previewing activities to help your students prepare for the ideas presented by the video.
- » Encourage *active listening*. Because the content of this video is likely to elicit emotional responses from the students, it is important that the students engage with each other in ways that ensure everybody has the opportunity both to speak and to be listened to. It is advised that you set guidelines or norms to ways to “actively listen” in advance of classroom discussions. Check out MEF’s handout, *Techniques for Active Listening*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/ActiveListening.pdf>)
- » Have the students keep a journal. It will be an effective place for them to explore their own attitudes and opinions and to record their observations about the media.
- » Review and discuss the handout *How to be a Critical Media Viewer*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/CriticalViewing.pdf>)
- » Incorporate activism and advocacy into your media literacy study. They are an important part of empowering students.

# THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT<sup>1</sup>



## THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT EXPLAINED

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### **AWARENESS**

Students learn about the pervasiveness of the media in their lives.

### **ANALYSIS**

Students discuss the forms and contents of the media's various messages as well as the intent of most media to persuade an audience.

### **ACTIVISM**

Students develop their own opinions about the negative and positive effects of the media and decide to do something about it – this can be in the form of praise for healthy media, protest of unhealthy media, or development of campaigns to educate others with regard to the media, to change media messages, etc.

### **ADVOCACY**

Students learn how to work with media and use their own media to develop and publicize messages that are healthy, constructive, and all too often ignored by our society.

### **ACCESS**

Students gain access to the media – radio, newspaper, internet, television, etc. – to spread their own message. This in turn leads to further awareness of the media and how it works, which leads to a deeper analysis and so forth.

1. Diagram and explanation adopted from E.D.A.P.'s GO GIRLS! Curriculum, (c) 1999 (<http://www.edap.org/gogirls.html>)

## **PLAYING UNFAIR: THE MEDIA IMAGE OF THE FEMALE ATHLETE**

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As *University of Minnesota Professor Mary Jo Kane* observes, “We are in the best of times and the worst of times with respect to media representations of female athletes.” Thanks to the historic passage of the federal civil rights legislation Title IX some 30 years ago, girls and young women now have unprecedented and equal access to athletics. The result is that today more girls and young women play and excel in sports of every kind, at all levels, than ever before, while national awareness and media coverage of women’s sport continue to grow. But despite – or perhaps because of – the increased cultural presence and visibility of women’s sheer athletic ability, media coverage continues to represent female athletes, and women’s sports, through the restrictive lens of gender stereotypes. By continuing to feature and pay far more attention to men’s sports and male athletes, and by focusing on stereotypes of traditional femininity in their limited coverage of female athletes, media producers reveal a profound ambivalence about the very nature and meaning of sport, and about the relationship of sport to longstanding cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity.

*Playing Unfair* explores just this: first, the continued under-representation of female athletes and women’s sports; second, the continued misrepresentation of women who play sports – as stereotypically “feminine” first, and athletes second. The video asks, specifically, whether this phenomenon might not be an indication of the threat posed by women’s physical strength, power and athleticism to basic definitions and traditional ideals of masculinity; to traditional ideals of femininity; to the masculine bias of male producers of sports coverage; and to the masculine exclusivity, sense of male entitlement, and homophobia that inhere in sports culture itself. These questions are crucial given that sports culture is one of the key places where ideas, ideals and norms of femininity and masculinity get defined, circulate and maintain themselves.

# INTRODUCTION

## KEY POINTS

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- » The increased visibility of strong, physically powerful and active female athletes has challenged simple gender dichotomies that equate masculinity with physical strength, competence and action, and femininity with sex appeal, marriage or mothering.
- » Because sport carries deep and extremely influential cultural meaning, the increased presence of women in sport carries with it profound challenges to cultural norms.
- » Sports, and sports media coverage, are traditionally masculine domains, and media coverage has had the effect of keeping them that way: by marginalizing or containing the increased presence and power of women in the media world of sport.
- » Female athletics and athletes, because they demonstrate so clearly the physical strength, power and capability of women, pose a threat to definitions of masculinity that depend on difference from women, specifically definitions that depend on the exclusion of women and stereotypically feminine values.
- » While female athletics and athletes threaten to undermine the traditional equation of sport and manhood, media coverage of women's sport has worked to reinforce traditional stereotypes of both femininity and masculinity.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What is meant by "simple gender dichotomies"?
2. What would a more complicated view of gender difference look like?
3. In what ways do traditional definitions of manhood and masculinity depend on particular definitions of femininity?
4. How does women's sport challenge definitions of manhood and masculinity that require restrictive and traditional views of femininity and women?
5. Are women who are strong, athletic, and physically competent "masculine"?
6. Is "feminine strength" an oxymoron?

## EXERCISES

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1. Look up "masculine" and "feminine" in the dictionary. List the qualities that are associated with each. Do the same with a thesaurus: list the synonyms of "masculine" and "feminine."
2. What kinds of patterns and associations do you see in these lists? In other words, what kinds of values emerge from each? More specifically, how do definitions of "femininity" and "masculinity" incorporate certain ideas about physicality, whether physical strength, physical action, physique, or the body? What meanings are assigned to the body and its uses in these definitions?
3. Do definitions of "masculine" seem to depend on definitions of "feminine"? Or does each term seem to be an independent concept? Does one seem more independent than the other? What do you make of this?
4. Do the definitions suggest that "masculine" and "feminine" are necessarily attached to males or females? Is gender the same as sex?
5. How do you think these patterns and associations – embedded in the very language we use – relate to our most common views of athletics and sport in general? More specifically, in your experience, how do sport, and sports talk, draw on these patterns and associations?

# INTRODUCTION

- 6.** Based on these patterns and associations, are there some sports that would be considered more stereotypically “masculine” or “feminine” than others? More specifically, in your opinion, what’s the most “masculine” sport in America? What is the most “feminine” sport? Why?
- 7.** And do you think these views hold true in other cultures as well? Can a sport that is considered “masculine” in one culture be considered “feminine” in another? If so, why is this? What does this say about gender?
- 8.** Do you feel that young people look to sports for role models? How does media coverage of sports work to create such role models?

# TAKING THE FIELD

## KEY POINTS

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- » The Federal civil rights legislation known as Title IX passed in 1972 to level the playing field in educational institutions and allow girls and women equal access to school sports.
- » Title IX changed the very culture of female athletics by putting to rest traditional questions about the appropriateness of girls and women playing sports.
- » As **Mary Jo Kane** puts it, “In one generation we’ve gone from girls hoping that there is a team, to hoping that they make the team.”
- » Title IX, by requiring institutional support, creating equal access and opportunity, and changing the way female athletes are seen and see themselves, has led to a massive increase in the number of girls and young women who play sports.
- » While Title IX has had the effect of increasing participation over the past three decades and, over time, the level of competition in women’s sports, an entirely separate issue concerns how these changes, and the nature of female athletics, have been presented and represented in media.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Why was Title IX proposed and passed? Why was it necessary, and what did it accomplish?
2. What differences do you think there are between the way girls and young women view sports today compared to 40 years ago? Other than Title IX, what else may have contributed to these changes in perception?
3. Consider the issue of “entitlement.” What does this term mean? What does it imply? How does it relate to power? And how does all of this relate to the notion of entitlement in sport?
4. Why is Title IX considered “civil rights” legislation? What does it have in common with other forms of civil rights legislation?
5. What arguments do you feel were made against passage of Title IX?
6. How would you argue against those who opposed it?
7. Struggles over access to playing fields still exist on college campuses. What kinds of lingering assumptions might come into play in these struggles?

## EXERCISES

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1. Research Title IX.
2. Find the actual legislation in a law book, or online, and read its wording carefully. What assumptions, or values, does it seem to be based on?
3. Research the debate that surrounded Title IX – the actual Congressional debate and/or the debate in media. What specific arguments were made against the legislation? In what ways, if any, do feel any of this opposition was gendered? In other words, do you see any assumptions about masculinity and femininity built into these arguments?

# OUT OF UNIFORM

## KEY POINTS

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- » Analysis of the major sports channels, and of sports coverage generally, reveal that women's sports are severely under-represented despite the growth in women's college and professional sports programs, and in the participation of girls and young women in sports generally.
- » In the coverage that is dedicated to women's sports, female athletes are far more likely to be depicted in sexualized terms, in hyper-feminized terms, and outside the range of their actual athletic accomplishments.
- » This persistent tendency to sexualize, trivialize and marginalize physically strong, athletic women has the effect of undermining the power of female athletes, and works to contain the threat this power poses to traditional equations of manhood and masculinity with sport.
- » These inherent biases in media coverage of women's sports reflect profound cultural anxieties about changing definitions of femininity and masculinity.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Why do you think more attention is paid to men's sports than women's sports in major media coverage?
2. Why do you think women tend to be represented in stereotypically "feminine" ways in sports coverage? Do you think this is deliberate? Do you think the reasons are more subtle? Explain.
3. What might be some of the effects of this "trivializing" female athletes and athleticism? Specifically, how might this affect how boys and men view:
  - a. girls and women
  - b. view themselves as boys and men
  - c. view differences between "masculinity" and "femininity"
  - d. view the world of sports generally.
4. Do you feel that limited, and distorted, coverage of women's sports simply reflects a lack of mainstream interest in women's sports? Or do you feel that this coverage itself determines in some sense the amount and type of interest in women's sports?
5. How does the fact that sports media is a predominately male field affect coverage of sports overall? Do you feel gender equity in sports media would necessarily change coverage? If you think so, how and why? If not, why not?

## EXERCISES

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1. Research, compare and contrast coverage of men's and women's sports in a major sports magazine (*Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN Magazine*, etc.).
2. Analyze how the coverage differs, paying particular attention to the following:
  - a. the amount of coverage (the amount of space given to each)
  - b. the placement of coverage (how prominently it's featured)
  - c. the way female and male athletes are presented visually (on the field or off; with or without others, etc.)
  - d. differences in language use – in the very way these athletes, or these events, are described and represented in language.
3. Once you have described any and all differences you have found, think about these differences in light of gender. Specifically, how do differences in coverage draw from or reinforce any of the gender stereotypes (of masculinity and femininity) discussed in the video?

# PLAYING ALONG

## KEY POINTS

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- » While media have continually represented women athletes in sexualized or other trivializing ways that have little or nothing to do with their athletic ability or accomplishments, the fact is that a number of women athletes have regularly and willingly chosen to be represented in these ways.
- » A number of female athletes have argued that such representations have less to do with their disempowerment as athletes than their empowerment as individuals: that they gain power by expressing their individuality as women, their femininity, their sexuality, at the same time winning both publicity for their sport and economic power through promotional deals.
- » The nature and benefit of individual power and expression need to be considered within the context of institutional dynamics and cultural consequences.
- » The individual choices women athletes make need to be thought about in the context of how these choices translate into images of female athletes that circulate through a larger sports media system that defines women's power and physical ability almost exclusively through sexuality.
- » Likewise, the meanings of these sexualized images need to be considered in the context of their reception: how they are received and what they mean to male consumers, and to girls and young women who are coming to terms with what it means to be an athlete and a woman.
- » This focus on women athletes as hypersexual, or hyper-feminine, needs also to be considered alongside the overall dearth of coverage of women's sports, and the relative absence of coverage of women athletes as athletes first. When valuable ideals like individual empowerment and expression circulate within so limited a frame, the risk is that women's sports get devalued – even as the very gender stereotypes that made Title IX necessary in the first place get valued.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Do you agree with women athletes who argue that posing in sexualized ways can be an expression of their strength and power, and of pride in their bodies?
2. Do you agree that posing is an individual choice? How should we weigh individual actions within the context of the larger cultural environment?
3. What critique of the value of individual expression is offered in the video? Does this critique seem to you to be concerned with desexualizing women? Is it concerned with widening the range of media representations of women – especially women athletes? What's the difference between these two ways of characterizing individual expression?
4. Are sexual representations always disempowering to women in our culture? When are they? When are they not? And how can we tell the difference?
5. What ideas, and values, do highly sexualized images of female athletes create and reinforce? How might these ideas, and values, be consumed differently by males and females? What might be some of the larger cultural effects of these differences in consumption?
6. Whose interests are served when women athletes are presented in hyper-feminized, or hyper-sexualized, ways? Is there more than one set of interests at work and at stake here? Is one or another served more powerfully?
7. What does power – institutional power, male power – have to do with the way women's sports and female athletes get represented?

# PLAYING ALONG

## EXERCISES

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1. Find an image in a magazine that shows a female athlete doing something other than playing her sport.
2. Analyze the image with the video's arguments in mind. Specifically, how does the image make use of or challenge stereotypes of femininity? And how do you think this image works to reinforce or challenge, in more general terms, the traditional image of female athletes and women's sports?

# THE GLASS CLOSET

## KEY POINTS

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- » The traditional association of physical strength, power and athleticism with masculinity causes many people to question the sexuality of women athletes.
- » Because female athletes challenge traditional notions of femininity, because their abilities are seen as traditionally and stereotypically “masculine,” female athletes and women’s athletics must contend always with homophobia.
- » Women’s sports organizations and women athletes have been forced to consciously present themselves as heterosexual and as unthreatening to family values in order to remain socially acceptable and economically viable.
- » The homophobic subtext of women’s sports plays out in repeated media images of female athletes as mothers, as wives, as girlfriends, i.e. as heterosexual.
- » The consequent fear of media scrutiny in turn has led women’s sports promoters to emphasize the wholesome, family-friendly nature of their teams; led female athletes to clearly mark and market themselves as heterosexual, and led to lesbian athletes to stay in the closet.
- » This homophobic dynamic is especially paradoxical, and presents special challenges to sports ownership, given the large lesbian fan base of women’s professional sports.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. According to the video, how does homophobia affect women’s sports? Do you agree with this argument?
2. What does sexuality have to do with gender? Specifically, what does homophobia have to do with ideas about gender, with ideas about masculinity and femininity?
3. According to the video, how does homophobia function in women’s sports? How does it affect:
  - a. how women’s sports are promoted
  - b. how heterosexual female athletes think about and present themselves
  - c. how lesbian athletes think about and present themselves?
4. What is the relationship between “family values” and women’s sports? Why, according to the film, does there seem to be such an anxious relationship between the two?
5. How does anxiety about women’s sexuality play out in media coverage of women’s sports?
6. Do you see homophobia, as discussed in this video, as an expression of masculine anxiety? Of male anxiety? What’s the difference, if any, between male and masculine anxiety?
7. Do you feel homophobia plays a powerful role in men’s sports as well? In how men’s sports are talked about, covered, presented in media? If so, how? Give specific examples. And think about how homophobia in coverage of male sports might work differently than homophobia in coverage of female sports.
8. How is homophobia used to keep female athletes from advancing in sports? How does it preserve the privileged status of male sports?

# THE GLASS CLOSET

## EXERCISES

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1. Analyze and compare coverage of a number of female athletes in a magazine in the context of this argument that homophobia is a persistent problem in women's sports.
2. Talk about any patterns you see in how these women are presented. Specifically, are there "markers" or signals in how they are presented that tell you something about their sexuality?
3. Compare coverage of female athletes in this context to coverage and representations of male athletes. Specifically, do you see in representations of male athletes (whether in the language used to describe them, or in the construction of visual images) visual or linguistic clues that clearly mark them as heterosexual?

# FAIR PLAY

## KEY POINTS

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- » Norms and ideals of masculinity and femininity are cultural constructions; young people learn what it means to be a man or a woman, and what they learn depends on who is doing the teaching and when.
- » Sports culture in the United States, because it is so inherently gendered, so traditionally a masculine arena, is one of the most prominent places where gender is defined and taught.
- » While in the wider culture women's increased power has challenged traditional gender dichotomies, the world of sports media lags far behind.
- » Sports media do cultural work, actively constructing for millions of boys and young men what it means to be a man, to be masculine, and therefore what it means to be a woman, to be feminine.
- » As long as sports coverage and those who produce it rely on outmoded stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, as long as they work to appease the anxieties that always attend change, they will continue to perpetuate the myth that female sports are somehow less exciting than male sports.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What lessons about gender are taught through sports? Compare and contrast the way these lessons come across in the actual playing of sports vs. the consumption of sport through media.
2. Are stereotypical and traditional masculine values like physical toughness, aggressiveness and violence the kind of values that media should start assigning to women's sports as well? In other words, do you feel media coverage of sports would be more true to women athletes, and would make progress, if it broke with traditional stereotypes of femininity as passive and sexual and nurturing and fit women instead into the traditional masculine world of aggression and toughness?
3. In what ways might there be a relationship between the nature and style of media coverage of men's sports and the nature and style of media coverage of women's sports? In other words, if media coverage of men's sports were different – more open to alternative views of manhood – might this contribute to more open, varied and diverse coverage of women's sports?
4. According to the video, why is it so important to "just turn on the camera"? What is the role of media representation in changing cultural attitudes and values?

## EXERCISES

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1. Compile a list of what you see as the potentially positive values sports can teach and instill in young people, regardless of whether they are male or female.
2. Compare this list to the list of definitions and synonyms of masculinity and femininity from the first exercise above. What differences do you see? Do your lists suggest that there is something inherently masculine about the values you assign to sport? Something inherently feminine? A mix of both?
3. How, specifically, would media coverage of both men's and women's sports have to change if the values you see in sport are to be emphasized and valued in sports media culture?