

MEDIA EDUCATION
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TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

PLAYING UNFAIR

THE MEDIA IMAGE OF THE FEMALE ATHLETE

PLAYING UNFAIR: *The Media Image of the Female Athlete*

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INTRODUCTION – The Best of Times and The Worst of Times

[News voice-over] Is the American public ready to embrace professional women's teams and the image of a tough, physical, female athlete?

MARY JO KANE: As we enter a new century, we are in what I call the Best of Times and the Worst of Times with respect to media representations of female athletes. There has been both widespread acceptance and movement of women in sport that was unheard of thirty years ago, and at the same time there's been an increasing backlash about their success and their presence.

MICHAEL MESSNER: I think not too long ago, it was very easy to equate athleticism, strength, physical power, with men, and by contrast to think about women as weak, as supportive for men, purely as sexual objects. Now that landscape has changed somewhat with the tremendous growth of girls and women's sports.

[Sports commentator] There's Rebecca Lobo with a jumper!

MICHAEL MESSNER: Everybody has the opportunity to see strong, powerful, physically competent, competitive women and I think that really challenges that simple gender dichotomy that we used to take so much for granted.

PAT GRIFFIN: Sport is not just a trivial activity for fun. It has real, deep cultural meaning in this society. And I think that to challenge that meaning in terms of what it means to be a man in this culture, by inviting women in and acknowledging that women are also athletic and muscular and strong, is a real challenge to that cultural norm that we live in.

MARY JO KANE: There is a cultural assumption that I think persists even to this day, that because of the definition of masculinity and sport, part of the birthright of being male in this culture is owning sport. You own sport. As women move into this once exclusive domain of male power and privilege and identity, there's been a tremendous backlash, and a desire to push back, and either to push women out of sport altogether or certainly to contain their power within in and keep them on the margins.

TAKING THE FIELD – The Impact of Title IX

MARY JO KANE: Title IX is federal legislation, civil rights legislation that was passed in 1972 by the federal government. The legal piece of the law and the spirit and the intent of the law is to ensure that in educational institutions, females will have the same opportunities as will males.

MICHAEL MESSNER: Girls now believe that they have a right to play sports and they're surprised when they come up against barriers that say "you can't do this" or "the boys have this field and you can't use it." And they're quite ready and willing to start fighting because they see that that's just patently unfair.

MARY JO KANE: The way that I like to think about Title IX in terms of its impact is that in one generation, we have gone from young girls hoping that there *is* a team, to young girls hoping that they *make* the team. It is only because of Title IX that young girls today have a sense of entitlement to sport.

[TV interview: Rebecca Lobo] Title IX is the integral reason we're here. I mean college basketball wouldn't have reached this level of popularity without Title IX, without universities being forced to implement Title IX.

MARY JO KANE: So I think the issue of whether or not women should be allowed to play sport, which was very much in play pre-Title IX, that question has been put to rest. There's too much of a critical mass now to push women out of sports altogether. So now the question becomes what will that participation look like?

OUT OF UNIFORM – The Media Backlash Against Female Athletes

MICHAEL MESSNER: If you just watch the sports news, and you just watched ESPN, and if you just picked up *Sports Illustrated Magazine* for your main print source of information about what's going on in the sports world, it would be easy to continue to conclude that there is no women's sports happening.

MARY JO KANE: Women are significantly underrepresented with respect to amount of coverage, even though women represent 40% of participants nationwide in terms of sport and physical activity. What all the studies indicate is they represent about 3-5% of all the coverage. So we give viewers a very false impression if you just rely on the media, that women simply aren't participating in sports in the numbers that they are.

MICHAEL MESSNER: Over the course of a decade that we were doing research on the coverage of women's and men's sports, our dominant finding was how much the coverage of women's sports had not changed. About 5% of the airtime was given to women's sports. In our most recent study, ten years later that had gone up to about 8%, which is still miniscule. I mean it's really a tiny increase in over ten year period in coverage of women.

[NBC News] They are very excited. The NBA playoffs have arrived and while the Knicks are dominating...

MICHAEL MESSNER: You set the tone and make a statement about what's most important and what the key happenings of the day were with your lead story.

[NBC News] a big night coming up in sports as the Islanders...

MICHAEL MESSNER: What we found is almost always the lead stories were about men's sports. They put a lot more production value into the men's coverage. There's tape, there's graphics, there's interviews and so forth.

[ESPN promo] June heats up on ESPN.

MICHAEL MESSNER: When women do kind of peak into the frame, though, it's usually in ways that are mostly dismissive or disrespectful.

[ABC News Channel 7] Finally, a hearty erin go bra to my countrymen and-women out there, and in your honor we have a little Erin Go Bra-less.

MICHAEL MESSNER: In our study, one of the longest stories that was done on the sports news for instance was on a female nude bungee jumper on St.

Patrick's Day who had painted her body green and jumped off of a bridge and they did a very long story on this – on the sports – meanwhile ignoring all the sports women had been playing that day: a major golf tournament and so forth.

[ABC News Channel 7]

--*That's wonderful; do we have to slow that down?*

--*That was amazing, I'll remember it forever.*

--*...And so will we.*

MICHAEL MESSNER: Well we all know that news isn't totally objective, but it's supposed to be a picture of what happened today in the world.

MARY JO KANE: What we know in terms of the data is that women athletes are significantly more likely than male athletes to be portrayed off the court, out of uniform, and in these hyper feminized roles. The thing that we infrequently see is images of women athletes as athletes. I think we need to talk about why that is and who benefits from *not* seeing women athletes as athletes.

PAT GRIFFIN: Who's controlling the images that we see in the media, and I think particularly if you look at sports media, by and large, the decisions about what images are portrayed, what images are used, who gets coverage, are still made by men. They're part of a culture that sees women in a particular way. And so I think they prefer to see women athletes portrayed in a more feminine way, it's more comfortable.

MICHAEL MESSNER: When television does cover women's sports, they're most likely going to cover women's tennis, and during certain seasons and certainly during the Olympics, women's figure skating. There's a traditional equation of femininity with tennis and figure skating that makes some sports commentators more comfortable with covering them – they fit more in their own ideological frame about what women are supposed to look like and how they're supposed to act.

There's still a tendency, we found, in the play-by-play coverage of tennis to call women athletes more often by their first names, as though there's some sort of familiarity that the commentator has with them.

[Tennis commentator] ... *to counter Jennifer's return.*

[Tennis commentator] ... *you just never know which Amelie's going to show up.*

[Tennis commentator] ... *Monica, trying to hang on, but Serena's serve...*

MICHAEL MESSNER: And to call men athletes by their last name or by their last and first name.

[Tennis commentator] ...*and Ruzesky takes the game...*

[Tennis commentator] ... Agassi, through to the semis, and coming off his French Open win.

MICHAEL MESSNER: People who work in an office, the boss will call the secretary by her – or his, if it’s a male secretary – first name, and the referent the other way is always “Mr.” or “Mrs.” or some title.

PAT GRIFFIN: I think what’s going on is we still have a lot of cultural anxiety about strong women and what that means about them as women. And until we can sort of move much further, as a culture in opening up the boundaries for what we consider to be OK for girls and women in sport, we’re always going to have that ambivalence there.

MARY JO KANE: As we went into the women’s World Cup soccer, nobody knew who Brandi Chastain was. We knew who Mia Hamm was, but we didn’t know who Brandi Chastain was. We know who she is now.

[Newscaster] World Cup hero Brandi Chastain, throws the first pitch – tank top, no sports bra.

[ABC News Channel 7] And uh, Brandi did keep her shirt on, but did take a sweater off, during warm-ups.

[ABC News Channel 7] It was announced Nike will exploit Brandi Chastain’s strip tease by attaching her to a line of sports bras.

MARY JO KANE: It immediately got turned into “Brandi Chastain took her shirt off,” rather than “what fabulous athletes these women are!”

MICHAEL MESSNER: How many times did we see images of Jenny Thompson actually swimming in *Sports Illustrated*? But when she posed for *Sports Illustrated* in that way, we saw her and now we know who she is.

MARY JO KANE: What got taken up in the press and the public discourse wasn’t who Jenny Thompson was and what she’d accomplished as a great swimmer, an Olympic swimmer, but what did it mean to have Jenny Thompson take her shirt off?

[Montage of images of female athletes and non-athlete models]

MARY JO KANE: And the images that you see of women being physically powerful and strong and contrast that to the images of women athletes as little sex kittens, it’s an enormous difference. And it is such a powerful contrast that I would argue that is exactly why those images are suppressed. Because sport is all about physical, emotional, and mental empowerment. And so what do you do with all these women who are becoming great athletes and learning the lessons

of empowerment and self respect and pride that you get from participating in sport? How are you going to keep that force at bay? And one way that you do that is to do a very time honored and tested mechanism of keeping women's power at bay and that is to sexualize them, trivialize them, and marginalize them.

There are more and more images of women athletes that bear alarming resemblances to soft pornography. What you see is an emphasis, not on their athleticism and their athletic achievements, or their mental courage and toughness, but on their sexuality, their femininity, and their heterosexuality.

So what better way to reinforce all of the social stereotypes about femininity and masculinity than to pick up *Sports Illustrated* or *Rolling Stone* or *Maxim* or *Gear* and see an image of a female athlete, not as strong and powerful but as somebody that you can sexualize and feel power over.

I don't think that there's a more overt example of that these days than in the world of professional tennis in the image of Anna Kournikova. She has the most corporate sponsorship of any professional female athlete and it is not because of her athletic competence because she is as of this date, still has never won any singles tournament, let alone a Major.

PAT GRIFFIN: What it says to me is that an athlete's sexual appeal quotient is much more important than her athletic ability quotient and her athletic accomplishment quotient. And it's very difficult to imagine the same kind of thing happening in men's tennis – a player who has never won a major tournament getting the kind of attention – media attention and endorsement in terms of money that Anna Kournikova gets. And I think that as long as that's possible, it really gives us a pretty good gauge of what are the important things in women's sports.

MICHAEL MESSNER: One of the new things over the last several years is there definitely is more media sexualization of men and men athletes in particular. Men are being viewed as sexy, mostly because of what they do. Of course they have to look good, but they're viewed as sexy primarily for what they're doing on the court or on the field, how good an athlete they are, how powerful they are, how they move when they play. Women are being viewed as sexy not for what they're doing on the court or for what they're doing on the field, but for how they look and what they wear off the field and how they pose off the field, and that's the key difference.

[ESPN: World's Sexiest Athlete] *The world's sexiest athlete? Anna Kournikova, hands down. Have you seen the billboard of it? That explains enough.*

Kournikova: *All athletes are entertainers. As long as people like what they're seeing, they're going to keep coming back, so I think that's good.*

PLAYING ALONG – Empowerment or Exploitation?

MARY JO KANE: It's not just how the media portray women athletes. It's how they are promoted and how they portray themselves. They simply feed into and keep the engine going of the way in which the media portray women athletes.

[Entertainment Tonight!: Brandi Chastain interview] It was something that I'm glad I did and if it got attention for soccer, then good.

MICHAEL MESSNER: Those are paradoxical images that both suggest empowerment for women and suggest that this media is still trying to frame women in conventionally sexualized ways. And I think that plays into very easily the idea that I, as an individual, need to feel empowered or do feel empowered by taking off my clothes and posing and getting myself into a major national magazine and maybe getting some endorsements.

PAT GRIFFIN: There are other women that I've talked to – young women – who see this in a real different way. They don't really see that as compromising or an expression of concern about how people see them. They just see that as – “that's just my individual way of expressing myself.” And I think that certainly could be true for a certain number of them. But what I always want to say to them is it's important to look at the larger picture of pressures, that it's not just about individual choice. That if you look at how women athletes portray themselves, and how they're portrayed in the media, it's a part of a much larger cultural expectation. Is this the kind of image that we want young girls who are interested in sport to aspire to? Do we want them to think that in order to be respected as an athlete, they have to strip?

MARY JO KANE: And a very common retort is “what's wrong with being portrayed as feminine?” and “we want to be portrayed as well-rounded” and “there's nothing wrong with showing off our bodies. We're *proud* of our bodies.” And on the surface, I think that all of those are very legitimate arguments. The problem that I have is that for women to show that they have strong and powerful bodies, it does not require them to take their clothes off. The way that those images get taken off is basically in terms of locker room titillation. It has absolutely nothing to do with men sitting around, saying, “Boy, I really respect them as fabulous athletes.” It's about consuming their bodies for men's sexual pleasure. So that in no way empowers them or is done as an empowering image.

MICHAEL MESSNER: I don't think you'd have near the amount of controversy or debate if a woman occasionally decides to pose half-clothed in front of a camera for *Sports Illustrated* or something. But it's the dearth of coverage of women and the dearth of respectful coverage of women's athletics in those major media that makes those images stand out so much and be so controversial.

THE GLASS CLOSET – Homophobia in Sport & Sports Media

MARY JO KANE: Homophobia is in the bone marrow of women's athletics, you simply cannot get around it.

[ABC News] Billie Jean King, the undisputed Queen of Tennis. Last Friday, facing what is certainly the most serious crisis of her career, thirty-seven year old Billie Jean admitted she had had a homosexual affair with her former Marilyn Barnett.

[NBC News] Billie Jean King's contract to make television ads for ER Squibb Company is not being renewed. The New York Daily News quotes a company official as saying she was too strong a personality, that she was overpowering the product. He denied that the company's decision had anything to do with Mrs. King's disclosure of a lesbian relationship. The News says Avon Products is reviewing its connection with Mrs. King cautiously.

MARY JO KANE: I think its pretty clear that if you're a female athlete and you want corporate sponsorship, you'd better project a wholesome image. And part of that wholesomeness is the assumption that you are not lesbian, that you are heterosexual. So you'll have a disproportionate number of images of women athletes with children, with boyfriends, with husbands, to clearly mark themselves as heterosexual.

PAT GRIFFIN: Sometimes I refer to that as sort of the protective camouflage of feminine drag that women athletes and coaches feel sort of compelled to monitor in themselves and in others. Certainly it's this need to reassure people – I'm an athlete, I may be a great athlete, but don't worry, I'm still a normal woman.

MARY JO KANE: The acronym for the professional golf tour is the LPGA, as in the Ladies Professional Golf Association and I think it has been widely known or feared for many years that the "L" stands for "lesbian." The LPGA and the women who've played in the Tour have taken great pains to distance themselves from that lesbian image and to again, very overtly and explicitly identify themselves as heterosexual.

[TV ad] Hey Laura Baugh, UltraBrite toothpaste would like to proposition you. Laura: Right here? On national television?

MARY JO KANE: Jan Stephenson who was a well known professional golfer was part of an LPGA calendar – "we're professional golfers by day but we're really sexy gals by night." A disproportionate amount of the coverage given to Nancy Lopez who's one of the greatest golfers ever on the Tour was about her marriage to Ray Knight who's a professional baseball player with the Mets, and

her role as a mother. There were lots of pictures of Laura Baugh when she was pregnant and playing on the Tour. The LPGA rarely gets any media coverage and yet there was a lot of media coverage around “is she going to be able to get through the round and the tournament and not go into labor?” The media or the corporate sponsors or the women athletes themselves specifically identify themselves with the role of wife and mother, which clearly marks them as heterosexual.

[ABC News] For Chris Evert this will be her nineteenth and last US Open.

MARY JO KANE: In the late 1980s, one of the greatest professional tennis players this country has ever produced, Chris Evert, announced her retirement. *Sports Illustrated* chose to put her on the cover: “Now I’m going to be a full time wife.” They chose to portray her as somebody who was giving up her career to become a full-time wife. On the inside, with the profile, they had a pictorial chronology of Evert’s “career” in sport. This isn’t in “Bride Magazine” or in “Heterosexual Magazine” – its in *Sports Illustrated*, talking about her retirement as being a professional tennis player, and yet the focus, certainly in terms of the visual images you were given, was of Chris Evert as a heterosexual wife and mother.

PAT GRIFFIN: The more we focus on women athletes as heterosexual and sexy and feminine, the more lesbians in sport become invisible. It’s difficult enough in many cases to be a lesbian in sport, but to be held up against that standard that is not about me – that sense of being made to feel as if I must be invisible for the sake of women’s sports, for the sake of not creating controversy – it’s a huge pressure, and it keeps us from really dealing with some of the key issues in women’s sports which have to do with heterosexism and homophobia.

[ABC News] *It has added to the torment she has long suffered, from the public acknowledgement of her homosexuality.*

Martina: *It’s much easier being heterosexual, believe me. It’s much easier pretending.*

PAT GRIFFIN: There are heterosexual women in sport who are very much threatened by the idea that someone might think that they’re a lesbian, or would call them a lesbian. And lesbians in sport are very much concerned – and rightly so – about being discriminated against, if they’re identified in sport. And you put that together and it really drives a wedge between women in sport. And that wedge serves a larger social function of keeping women from forming alliances to really further women’s sport as a whole.

[Tennis commentator] *...I mean she came out and openly declared her sexuality and in team sports of course that would be suicidal – I don’t mean that literally, but I mean it would be a very, very hard thing.*

PAT GRIFFIN: I think it's amazing to me that in the WBNA, there is not one publicly out basketball player. And yet we know that there are many lesbians in basketball as there are in any sport. But none of them have felt personally safe enough, or I think another factor is feeling like the league itself, the women's basketball professional league, is safe enough to withstand the potential media scrutiny of acknowledging that there are lesbian players. You know, the weird thing is everyone knows there are lesbian players. So we have this strange sort of paradox of lesbians feeling that they need to hide, yet everyone knows that they're there – I often call it the "glass closet."

MARY JO KANE: The WNBA is very much aware that a large part of their fan base is lesbian. They're a new league, they are struggling to survive. So they certainly don't want to alienate any section of their fan base, especially one that's so prominent and loyal. On the other hand, they take great pains to market themselves as a family-friendly entertainment venue. And so because of homophobia and cultural stereotypes, we see that there's this contradiction on the one hand wanting to market yourself as family values entertainment, and on the other hand, what do you do with the fact that you have these lesbians in the stands?

MICHAEL MESSNER: There are stars that were put forward to promote the league, were positioned as the "girl next door," like Rebecca Lobo, a mother – Cheryl Swoops, or a fashion model – Lisa Leslie. And in doing that what they did was they pushed certain women forward as representing the league, who could exemplify what they saw as pretty conventional, heterosexual roles for women.

MARY JO KANE: I think the struggle is, how do you show athletic competence, athletic strength, athletic power – beating up and beating down your opponent – in ways that don't trigger cultural stereotypes about women athletes being too butch, being too manly, being too aggressive?

[Basketball Coach Pat Summit] *Get tough! Get tough!*

MARY JO KANE: In order for women athletes to be taken seriously as athletes, they have to be portrayed as competent, which in sports like basketball, by definition means being big, strong, tough, fast, powerful. You can't have one without the other, and yet to equate them means to challenge every stereotype and construction of femininity and masculinity we have in the culture.

FAIR PLAY – Women Athletes in Action

PAT GRIFFIN: Masculinity and femininity are not natural things. You know, boys don't pop out of the womb with a football in their arm, and girls don't pop out with a doll. We have to be *taught* very carefully how we're supposed to act to conform to those artificial expectations of masculinity and femininity. And to the extent that sport is very gendered in this culture – its one of the ways that masculinity and femininity are taught.

MICHAEL MESSNER: One of the things that people haven't really talked about that much though is that having more images of powerful women, respectful coverage of women's sports, is also potentially very good for boys. Boys are growing up in a world where they're going to have women co-workers, women bosses – the foundations for their views of women are being laid during their childhood. If what they're seeing is a sea of imagery that still suggests to them that athleticism is to be equated entirely with men and masculinity and that women are there simply as support objects or as objects of ridicule or as sexual objects, that is helping to shape the images that boys have of women. I don't believe that there's a conspiracy in the media to say "let's not cover women's sports" or "lets make fun of women athletes," but I think that especially sports desks and sports news people have not caught on to the fact yet that the culture has changed.

PAT GRIFFIN: Well, I don't think any social change happens in a nice, smooth sort of step-by-step path, onward and upward. If you look at any social change movement, whether we're talking about the black civil rights movement, the women's movement in general, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender movement – when there are changes, there's always a pushback. And so change sort of happens in that way, and I think that's what we're seeing here.

MARY JO KANE: All I'm asking is, turn the camera on, and let us see what it looks like when women participate in sports. And what we'll see is that they are terrific athletes who are enormously gifted and enormously committed to something that many people in this country love, and that's sport.