

Through Their Eyes: How Female Athletes Experience and Respond to Marginalization

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Introduction

“Andy, Sam is the first American player to reach the semi-final of a Slam since 2009...”

“Male player.” -Andy Murray

In 2017, Andy Murray had just lost in the quarterfinals at Wimbledon. In his post-match conference, a reporter explained how Murray was the first United States tennis player to reach a major semifinal since 2009 (He, 2017). When the reporter tried to finish his question, Murray cut him off and immediately responded with “male player.” This is one of the many examples of how people continuously undermine female athletes. This is an unfortunate recurring problem that women athletes face and are still being devalued compared to their counterparts. This seems to be the norm in the sports industry at both professional and pre-professional levels.

Sports can be considered the most common language to be shared between many countries all over the world. It can help bring various cultures together with worldwide events that are broadcasted all over. The Olympics and the World Cup are prime examples of how many different countries compete with their greatest athletes in the games. The Olympic Games is one of the most broadcasted events in the world and shows how prominent sports have been throughout the world. Even other events like college national championships’ can also be broadcasted on a worldwide level. With most broadcastings, however, previous research has found that more often men are significantly broadcasted more than women athletes. Some of the greatest athletes in this generation have been women in their respected sport, such as Serena Williams, Katie Ledecky, and Mia Hamm. These, along with several other, women have provided a sense of empowerment for young girls around the world, encouraging them that they can be just like them and compete on their level. However, the fact remains is that although these

females have had great accomplishments thus far, female athletes continue to be overshadowed by their male counterparts in media.

Sports media has contributed to a culture in which female athletes are represented as second tier within a culture that reinforces unfounded gender stereotypes. Through language, imagery, and broadcasting inequality, women are largely marginalized in the world of sports. Despite there being some progress through Title IX and other policies, female coaches and athletes are still significantly marginalized and undervalued because of this. Although previous research has illustrated that female athletes are devalued, how this marginalization affects female athletes both on and off the athletic arena has been well under-researched. In my research, I plan to utilize in-depth interviews to examine how female athletes and coaches at the collegiate level respond to marginalization. Specifically, I hope to discuss how devaluing female sports influences female athletes' confidence and motivation in their respective sports. Finally, I hope to examine what support structures are most successful in mitigating some of the negative impacts of marginalization for female athletes.

By first examining previous studies about symbolic interactionism, race theory, stigma, gender, marginalization and then conducting first-hand in-depth interview research, I hope to uncover a better picture of the processes through which female athletes experience and respond to marginalization. I argue that although female athletes are consistently relegated to a second-tier, supportive coaches and teammates help female athletes stay focused in athletic areas.

*Literature Review***Overshadowed: Symbolic Interactionism, Intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory in Sports**

Much of the reliance on how sports are broadcasted and shared to the world revolves around the overall concept of basic human interaction. Human interaction plays an essential role in how society will react and perceive things. In the early 19th century, sociologist, George Herbert Mead, introduced his theory of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is a theory that focuses on the relationships formed between people within a society. It emphasizes the micro-processes through which people form their different meanings and identities of themselves. Mead's student, Herbert Blumer, took the term "symbolic interactionism" into account and shaped the basic grounds of the theory. Blumer suggested that "humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances" (Blumer, 1969). This idea can serve as one of the cornerstones of social life and how gender is perceived in society. Symbolic interactionism is relevant to the discussion of gender within sports and the difference between masculinity and femininity. The symbolic nature of sports is evident throughout society. The motivation to play a sport varies and differs for everyone. People are generally socialized to play sports which they believe reflect their status. Women are not considered to play "rough" sports such as football or boxing.

Sociologist George H. Mead's ideas and theory of symbolic interactionism have also influenced many other sociologists and their works. Mead's contribution to sociology led to American sociologist, Erving Goffman, and his study of stigma and the presentation of self in the 1960s through 1970s. Goffman analyzed human interaction and the way people "present"

themselves in their life publicly. Goffman defined the term stigma as “any physical or social attribute or sign that so devalues an actor’s social identity as to disqualify him or her from society’s full acceptance” (Goffman, 1968). This means that this plays a major key in the differences in treatment between men and women athletes. Much of the marginalization in sports can root from these theories of how society views one gender as the lesser compared to the other. However, there is a defined difference between the marginalization in sports and the stigma that comes with it. Gender, moreover, intersects with race to further shape experiences for female athletes.

Female athletes of color find themselves confronting discrimination on two planes and organizing to combat sexism and racism in sports often fails to comprehensively address intersecting pressures facing women of color in sports. Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw define the theory of intersectionality and how these certain issues surround the theory. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term, intersectionality, just over 30 years ago (Steinmetz, 2020). Crenshaw used the term to describe people’s social identities and how they can overlap with one another. Crenshaw describes intersectionality today as “a prism, for seeing how various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts” (Steinmetz, 2020). Patricia Collins defines intersectionality as “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (Collins, 2015, p. 1). Collins expands more on how intersectionality ultimately lies in its focus on power relations and

social inequalities. When relating issues about race inequalities within sports, women are usually the afterthought when addressing these problems.

There is this constant perception that in sports our genes and the certain cultural background you have dictates the skill of an individual athlete, whether male or female (Hylton, 2009). Author Kevin Hylton challenges the conceptions derived through the critical race theory within sports in his book, *'Race' and Sport: Critical Race Theory*. The critical race theory (CRT) is a movement that is loosely organized with the framework of legal analysis based on the premise that race is not a natural, biologically grounded feature of physically distinct subgroups of human beings, but a socially constructed category that is used to oppress and exploit people of color (Britannica, 2021). When relating this more specifically to sports, Hylton argues that “the racialized social structures of sport contribute to the way we shape and experience our own and others’ identities” (Hylton, 2009). The term ‘race’ and racism are considered a powerful concept that even when they are the point of debate, especially in sports media, they remain unproblematized. Therefore, it is important that we not only need to appreciate what ‘race’ means in sport but also how sport, through a social structure, is organized and broadcasted in society. Many female athletes are continuously ridiculed and discriminated against because of their race. The intersection between race and gender continues to be a prevalent issue within the sports industry.

Earning Respect on the Field

The stigma that female athletes face carries a heavy burden on their shoulders. Mainly, the stigma that comes with being an athlete is considered to have a more negative perception from other people. Many athletes must balance several different tasks and find the balance between being both the student and the athlete. Although athletes must maintain certain rules and

regulations mandated by their institution, the majority of people ignore the fact and see athletes as the typical dumb jock stereotype. According to her academic journal article, Jennifer Parsons states that “the dumb jock stereotype assumes a lack of academic ability and motivation even those studies have demonstrated conflicting results regarding athletes and academic performance when compared to their student peers” (Parsons, 2013, p. 402). Without the knowledge of their academic ability in a classroom environment, there is still an extent of negative perceptions that athletes face among nonathletes.

Research outside of sports has found that stigma may cause severe consequences such as mental illnesses like depression or physical damages. It is important to explore the concept regarding its connection to socio-cultural issues in the development of stigmatization in sports. For instance, ‘competitive performance’ stigma has not been conceptualized or explored as a stigma type in sports research (McGannon, McMahon, & Zehntner, 2019, p. 283). Competitive performance stigma is a combination of the “enacted and felt” through acts of labeling, discrimination, and social isolation within sports. An example of this can be found through the article “I am fast, but I do not fit: an autoethnography of a swimmer's experiences of 'competitive performance' stigma in two sporting contexts.” With the general concept of Goffman’s theory of stigma, the social participants exemplified both 'enacted' and 'felt' competitive performance stigma and responded to the effects, like feeling sad or withdrawal from the sport itself. The authors highlighted that the role of cultural insiders, whether coach or swimmer, allowed the imitation of competitive performance stigma through acts of labeling, discrimination, and social isolation. Because of this, the female swimmer was referred to as an “outsider” and because of her competitive performance, which led to her withdrawal from these two sporting

circumstances. This then further highlights Goffman's theory and how the implications for recipients are ultimately stigmatized.

Female athletes face more stigma than male athletes because of the systematic misconception that women in sports are presumed to underperform compared to their counterparts. The stigma in sports can be separated by gender norms which can create an unequal sense of treatment in the athletic environment. The article, "The Role of Gender Identities and Stereotype Salience with the Academic Performance of Male and Female College Athletes," focuses on the different factors that affect the experience of academic identity threats among college athletes. College athletes are often represented as a stigmatized group when it comes to academics as compared to other students (Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, & Rullan, 2009, p. 78). Female college athletes would be threatened by this, however, because of the female vs male athlete stereotype. This contributes to a much bigger conversation because there is very little research on the impact of positive stereotypes on performance in academic versus athletic performance. This idea relates to "the motivational processes, like self-affirmation, and how this impact differs from male and female college athletes when aspects of their campus identity are primed within a classroom environment" (Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, & Rullan, 2009, p. 78). The gender difference between men and women allows for the discussion of the stigma of athletes and how their treatment differs and how it can be affected. With this, there have been many actions that have taken place to counteract this method of thinking.

Fighting for Recognition

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 bans discrimination based on sex in federally funded programs (Yuracko, 2002, p. 65). In 1979, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the Department of Education, the agency charged with administering Title IX, issued a Policy

Interpretation setting forth a three-prong test for Title IX compliance. Although there were three possible ways to comply with Title IX's anti-discrimination mandate, compliance ultimately comes down to the first requirement~the proportionality requirement. According to scholar Kimberly Yuracko, "the proportionality requirement, a college that it follows Title IX by providing varsity athletic sports for female and male students in proportion to their numbers in the undergraduate student body" (Yuracko, 2002, p. 65). This states that if a college is made up of 50 percent female students and 50 percent male students, the school must distribute one-half of its varsity team positions to women and one-half to men, to maintain fair and equal distributions of sports. Title IX ensures women that they are equal to their counterparts in their institution and are ensured that they are being given the same opportunities as them.

There is still a certain extent of gendered valuing of sports that currently play out in social relations, especially in the different values surrounding women's and men's sports. The article, "Barbie Dolls" on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women's Rugby", offers an analysis of certain processes of identity through sexist and homophobic settings. Female high school rugby players were studied but did not continue their sport throughout their college years. Rugby is one of the very few sports to have the same rules and equipment for both men and women. According to Matthew Ezzell, "the sport offered identity resources for the women, as athletes, because of its hypermasculine structure and style of play. The same aspects of the game, however, exposed the players, as women, to sexist and homophobic stigma from outsiders" (Ezzell, 2009, p. 111). The players responded to the harsh conditions by collectively creating an alternative identity that exemplified their strength, femininity, and heterosexuality. With the stigma that female athletes continue to face regarding their gender, they are still devalued compared to men in sports.

Women are under a constant scope with how they treat others and represent themselves out in the world. In most cases, women in sports receive negative reactions when they appear to be more physical and aggressive when playing their desired sport. The article “Strike a Pose! The Femininity Effect in Collegiate Women’s Sport” expresses how “team sport has long been associated with men and masculinity in a manner that naturalizes the gender, athleticism has historically placed women in dynamic tension with hegemonic femininity. Some women manage the tension between athleticism and hegemonic femininity by “apologizing” for their athleticism” (Musto & McGann, 2016, p. 101). Women instinctively apologize for their behavior because of the cultural association between hegemonic femininity and athleticism. Because of how female athletes have this “athletic look” to them, the normalization of athleticism for women is limited and rests on their certain femininities they should have. Even with positive changes that help women athletes, the overall team sport still maintains and normalizes the overall concept of gender order.

Although there are increased rates of female sport participation and the associated support, “gender transformation” is acknowledged as highly uneven: sports are predominantly still sex-segregated, males and females often participate in different sports, and the female 'drop-out' rates are significantly higher in teen years compared to males (Cooky & Messner, 2019, p. 247). The term “gender transformation” refers to the efforts to change gender and social norms to address inequalities in power and privilege between persons of different genders (University, 2018). The book, *No Slam Dunk* mentions that “media coverage is not equitable, professional salaries are vastly disparate, and significant barriers are still in place for transgender and gender non-conforming athletes and those with lower socio-economic capital” (Cooky & Messner, 2019, p.247-248). The authors share their view of the term 'gender' that relates to girls and

women and recognizes gender as a relational concept with a detailed focus on issues on certain types of masculinities, femininities, and sexualities. This can play into the idea behind the "social construction of gender" while relating to the "shared gender beliefs, ideologies, and mediated symbols" and "shifting gender divisions of labor and power" (p.260). While arguing for the end of sex testing, this allows for the sports culture to not be as sex-segregated and can therefore further enhance gender equalities. This can indicate why there is an increase in women's participation from youth sports to college sports. When regarding this, there seems to still be little change, or even regression, concerning women in sport leadership positions and sports media coverage.

Today, women are continuing to fight for recognition throughout the college level. In the March Madness 2021 Men's and Women's Basketball Tournament, the NCAA has recently come under fire for the lack of amenities, more specifically the workout equipment that was provided at the women's basketball tournament compared to the men. According to CNN sport's report on the issue, "the contrast was first highlighted by Stanford sports performance coach Ali Kershner who posted two photos on Instagram. One photo, according to Kershner, was the men's setup showing benches and other types of weight equipment. The other photo of the women's setup shows a set of free weights and some yoga mats" (Kallingal & Martin, 2021). The post included Kershner addressing the NCAA saying, "this needs to be addressed." In just a few hours the NCAA vice president of women's basketball, Lynn Holzman, responded to the post and acknowledged that "some of the amenities teams would typically have access to have not been as available inside the controlled environment." She added how there was limited space compared to the men's and that the plan was to expand the workout area once additional space was available. A collegiate athlete, Sedona Prince, who is participating in the tournament

contradicted the claim of the “limited space” and posted a video of all the extra space and captioned her video with: “if you’re not upset by this problem, then you’re part of it.” (Kallingal & Martin, 2021).

There have been several arguments over social media about this issue and if women should have the same privileges as their male counterparts. Several comments argued that women do not bring as many viewers as the men do throughout this tournament. Although this matters in terms of advertising revenue, this still does not justify the inequality between the two. Colleges give out scholarships and pay equally for sports based on what they believe is valuable. Basketball is considered an important sport to build a reputation for colleges in the sports world. If this were taken on a national level, like the NBA and WNBA then it is fair to base things from viewings because the NBA and WNBA bring in money through viewership contracts and media influence, which the WNBA lacks. But with regards to colleges, even though the women do not get as much viewership as the men, the colleges still end up paying for it. In just a matter of two days, the NCAA reacted to all the outrage on social media from other athletes and fans by creating a whole new facility for the women that provided everything that the men had. With the uproar that was caused by many people, athlete and nonathlete, from social media that the NCAA faced, it less encouraging to see just how quickly the association changed the facility to avoid further issues and because of the public shaming they have received from players and fans.

Much of the issues throughout the media surrounding the inequality in women’s vs men’s sports is around money and television advertisement deals. A recent article, published by The Washington Post, shows the disparities between the men and women funding within the NCAA. Sally Jenkins argues that women are not bringing in less money than men, but instead bringing in the same value as them on televised NCAA championships, like March Madness (Jenkins, 2021).

She then poses the question of why they are not given enough funding. Women tournaments make enough money, if not more money for these universities and colleges. Furthermore, women's sports are indirectly helping universities and colleges demand more money from TV networks, like ESPN and Sports Center. Even with the financial gain, women's sports offers at universities and colleges, female athletes continue to fight for recognition because they are still undervalued and not offered certain funding within the institution administrations which therefore shows a significant difference with the funding that goes into certain sports between men and women.

The Marginalization & Exploitation of Women in Sport

Women in sports, including both coaches and athletes, can be marginalized in many ways. Through language spoken in the media, images of women being used to appeal to a certain type of audience, or even broadcasting inequalities between men and women athletes, women are a concept that is considered insignificant. An example of this can be understood in the article, "Girls Are Not Made of Glass!": Barriers Experienced by Women in Norwegian Olympic Boxing." It has been a constant problem worldwide with the marginalization and exclusion of women in boxing that threatens basic a women's basic right to equal participation in sport. Anne Tjonndal argued the reason for the departure roots from the understanding of gender as a cultural code. She advocates that "both female coaches and boxers struggle to be taken seriously in their sporting practices. For women coaches, a central challenge is being accepted and respected as 'real' and capable coaches with valuable knowledge and experience in a male-dominated sport. Women boxers, on the other hand, are often subjected to unequal power relations with older male coaches" (Tjonndal, 2019, p. 87). This further offers the knowledge that women, whether

in or out of the ring, constantly must overcome barriers that men take advantage of with their gendered power and how much of a gap there is with the gendered disparity.

Gender differentiation is a key factor as to why the sports industry continues to label men and women athletes in different ways. There are several differences in how women athletes are portrayed in media verse their counterparts. When analyzing the National Collegiate Athletic Association media's cover photos, there is a differentiation in the depiction of women and men athletes (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004, pp. 66-67). With the rise of media in the sports world, Jo-Ann M Buysse and Melissa Embser-Herbert outline how with the increase of money being made from women in sports, the media should be more inclined to broadcast the increase of women and girls in sports. However, in the article, "Constructions of Gender in Sport: An Analysis of Intercollegiate Media Guide Cover Photographs", the authors argue that because "the marginalization of women's athleticism that results from these particular media presentations serves to reinforce male dominance and control of sport" (p.76). The argument then poses the problem that there continues to be a barrier to any change in the way the media presents the female athlete and body verse a man.

With the image of how women are portrayed in media, female athletes make up increasingly large proportions of fan bases of some of the most popular spectator sports and are recognized as a viable marketing tactic (Andrews, Cooky, & Esmonde, 2018, p. 498). Since then, women are used as the heterosexual desire for men, who are the predominant target audience in the sports industry. The image of women that is showcased through the media is primarily used to gain the attention of heterosexual men and create this sexual appeal to the culture of sports to increase the overall fan base. The article, "That's Not the Only Reason I'm Watching the Game": Women's (Hetero)Sexual Desire and Sports Fandom", addresses the stereotypical assumptions

women sports fans and athletes routinely experience. The authors explain how the “marginalization of women’s heterosexuality in sports fandom happens in four ways: by positioning the sexualization of athletes as antithetical to fandom, by challenging the exclusion of women’s heterosexuality in the fan cultures surrounding men’s sports, by discussing their own experiences of sexualizing athletes with guilt or ambivalence, and by downplaying the role that sexual attraction plays in their own fandom” (Andrews, Cooky & Esmonde, 2018, p. 499-500). Women fans have been noted through stereotypical assumptions that they are only interested in men’s sports because it is predominantly motivated by their attraction towards the male athletes. This proves how the marginalization of women sports fans’ with heterosexual desire, or ‘male gaze’, is found predominantly through the institutional center of sports who denies important facets of their experience, and in turn, supports the normative understandings of gendered sexuality that reinforce masculine hegemony in sports.

Methods

For my research, I planned on using qualitative research. For my qualitative research, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews made of open-ended questions that focused on experiences within the sport, experiences within the classroom environment, and stigma and gender. I selected in-depth interview methods to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). Semi-structured interviews allow for a much freer exchange between the interviewee and me. Therefore, I wanted to interview women who understand what life is like within their sport from their perspectives other than my own so I can understand another person’s point of view.

In the spring semester, I made a recruitment post on Instagram sites dedicated to collegiate student-athletes within New York, and on the Facebook page for SUNY Purchase

students. I interviewed participants that I asked directly through my social networks and utilized snowball sampling methods to ask these interviewees to forward, on the recruitment ad, their social contacts who can then contact me. Participants that agreed to be interviewed were interviewed once either by Facetime, Zoom, Google Meet, or Facebook Messenger as per their preference.

The participants of this study are 18 or older, women who have participated in sports throughout their collegiate years, whether a coach or athlete. I planned to explore how these women experience marginalization in the sport in different ways. Before starting the interviews, I emailed participants the “Informed Consent Form” to make sure that they are aware of the possible risks and asked for their age for the requirement. I planned to recruit people first via convenience sampling through my own social networks as a student-athlete, and then by snowball sampling from these initial contacts. Additionally, I posted on a recruitment post on Instagram sites dedicated to women collegiate student-athletes within New York and on the Facebook page for SUNY Purchase students.

I interviewed two female coaches and 10 different female student-athletes of all grade years within the college and different sports; to gain more information on their personal experiences in sports. This interview method allowed the participants to express themselves freely and explain their answers to the certain questions I asked. All the questions asked were approved through the IRB of my institution and can be found within my IRB protocol form application. I interviewed participants that I asked directly through my social networks and utilized the snowball sampling methods to allow for the increase of student-athletes within their acquaintances. I also required people with firsthand experience in college athletics, whether as an active athlete, coach, or alum.

With every research study, there are bound to be limitations that could potentially affect the research in some form (Clancy, 2019). The interviews are more time-consuming. Because of COVID-19, interviews were conducted online, or phone-based. They were also not generalizable to the whole population which can sometimes be difficult to get access to depending where you are. Although they are good for patterns and trends, it can be harder to have definitively finding causation or describing numeric data if asked. With this, there can also be a sort of social desirability bias depending on who I interview as well. The social desirability bias refers to what research subjects are more inclined to choose with their responses because they believe it is more socially desirable (Grimm, 2010). As previously stated, I examine the processes through which female athletes experience and respond to marginalization and how they compare to their male athlete counterparts. Although female athletes are consistently relegated to a second tier, I will also explore how and if supportive coaches and teammates help female athletes to stay focused in both academic and athletic areas.

Interviewees of this study were asked about their personal experiences, including friendships and professional relationships. My findings have been coded and labeled throughout different sections of my thesis. Each of the interviewees has been designated to certain sections of my findings based on their responses. With their responses, I entered which specific code they would be placed under to help with organization. With my data collected, I identified different themes and relationships between the interviewees that allowed for the groupings within the labeled sections. To ensure the privacy of the participants, I included pseudonyms for each of them along with pseudonyms for the institution they are currently participating in, whether as a coach or athlete. Following this section, I have provided my interview findings from the interviews I have conducted and further analyzed them.

Interview Findings

Gender Disparities

My first set of interviews were all through a joint Zoom video call. I interviewed 3 current women student-athletes who partake in the sports swimming and rowing from three different colleges. Alice is a junior and currently represents Greenberg University. She was recruited as Division 1 swimmer and has been on the team for all three years and plans to swim in her fourth and final year. Emily is a junior at the University of Pines and participates in Division 1 rowing program. She is unsure if she will continue the sport in the next season. Amanda is also a junior who is in a Division 3 program for swimming and plans to swim next season in the Fall of 2021. All the participants are from different ethnicities that include Chinese and Hispanic. Although all three of them go to different colleges, they all shared similar experiences within their athletic departments on their feelings about gender disparities. For example, when asked the question, “do you feel as though the athletics department and your university in general values your sport,” all of them answered no and further explained why. Emily was the first to interject and stated:

“No, it honestly depends on the varsity sport. If you don’t play either basketball or football, the athletic department does not really treat you as a priority.”

Emily’s statement echoes feelings of gender disparities within sports. Specifically, gendered sports, such as football and rowing, show an immense difference in treatment, funding, and media coverage within the intuition. Although such institutions incorporate Title IX to ensure the balance and equality of the distribution sports (Yuracko, 2002), rowing for instance is a specific

sport designated for women to balance out the male designated sports, like football, but is still undervalued and unequal to its counterpart in Emily's institution.

All of them agreed that there is a sense of being undervalued when compared to a male athlete in their certain sport or male sports. For instance, when discussing Title IX and how sports are supposed to balance with the number of women and men sports there are at the university (Yuracko, 2002), almost all three of them agreed that there was still this sense of unfairness. Alice took gender inequality a step further and provided interesting points.

"It's interesting to see how much funding goes into each sport. I participate in swimming, which I thought was decently funded, but then I looked at how the football team is treated and how that compares to us, it is a huge difference. It doesn't even have to do with funding either, it could be who gets more of a priority with COVID-19 testing. Why should they get special treatment and more access to that compared to us or even regular students?"

Alice noted that not only male sports funding was significantly better, but additionally, they got better treatment in other amenities. With recent issues regarding COVID-19 and testing on-site, the football athletes in her university got priority compared to other athletes and even regular students. In current events, such as the Coronavirus, it is imperative to note that even when something like a pandemic is universal, there is still a sense of hierarchy that can be distinguished and go completely unnoticed, especially within the sports administration and the new protocols that allowed for this.

"With Great Power, Comes Great Responsibility"

When it comes to administration and certain sporting events that take place, there is a clear difference in how the women's teams are treated compared to the men. This idea became

clear to me when talking with a few girls from Ace College. I interviewed each of the participants separately via Zoom call. Debbie is a sophomore at Ace College and participates in swimming in the fall season and lacrosse in the spring. Brittney is a sophomore as well at Ace college and participates in lacrosse and swimming during their respective seasons. Victoria is a senior at Ace College and has played softball for the school throughout her entire collegiate experience. Ace College is a Division 3 college, which can allow many students who have very little experience of a given sport to join the team. Regarding the administration and the sport, they play, all of the girls had similar views when it came time to describe the difference in how they are treated verse the men. When asked the question, “how do you think that male and female athletes are treated differently by the athletics department or other people in your university?” Victoria clarified certain instances and stated:

“It is clear as day there is a difference, even from my sport alone. There was a time when we barely had enough players to play a game one day and the athletic director basically told us to figure it out all by ourselves. When the men had the same issue, the athletic director helped the coach with everything and sent a mass amount of emails to ensure the boys would get to play and have enough players. This was just one of the many things...”

When asked to go on further, the senior compared injuries and how they are treated. She added her personal experience and how the administration dealt with her injuries.

“There is a clear difference with how the trainers provide care for the men compared to us. I have had several injuries throughout my time here, but when it came to who was being taken care of in the training room, I always seemed to be the one waiting if there was a male athlete present.”

Victoria's experience further contributes to the idea of gender power and the problems that women continue to suffer from because of it. In previous research stated earlier, women must constantly overcome barriers that men take advantage of with their gendered power, whether it is directly or indirectly caused (Tjonndal, 2019, p. 87). Like Victoria, there are several other instances in which female athletes endure the marginalization and exploitations that they face.

Both sophomores, Debbie and Brittney, are relatively new to the institution and the athletic administration. It was interesting to note that they have also seen and experienced some problems early on. They were asked individually "how do you think athletes in different sports are treated differently by the athletics department or other people in your university?" Both athletes initially agreed and felt that there is a defined difference with what sport you play as well. Debbie specified how different sports are perceived and broadcasted in the media:

"Within the first few months, I could already see a difference. If you look at how the sports are represented on the college media pages, you can see a lack of representation my sport has compared to the ones that seem more interesting, like basketball or volleyball. Even when it came time for meets, we barely had enough water for our team to drink compared to what I've seen the guys have at basketball games."

Brittney added into this idea with her response and how the lack of representation could also play into how gender and even race can be viewed.

"If you look at the media pages, like the one on Instagram or Twitter, you can see how little some sports are represented compared to others. This seems superficial, but maybe the problem is not what sport is being shown, but who is. Most of the time I predominantly see the boys being

shown to highlight the sport as opposed to us. It is also interesting to note how many people are white on the media page...”

Both Debbie and Brittney’s responses shown the common misconceptions that can be broadcasted through media alone. As previously mentioned, the media should be more inclined to broadcast women in sports but continue to fail (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 66).

Because of this, the problem remains that there is a barrier to any real change in the way the media presents men verse women. Even with the lack of representation and treatment that these athletes face, more can be said when adding race into the picture and how that ties into the marginalization of women.

Colliding Race with Gender

There has been a certain shift regarding gender identities in recent years. Many college institutions are not considered gender normative. An example of this can be seen throughout Ace College along with several others around the country. In addition to talking about their gender, several respondents mentioned how race should be considered a major factor when concerning female athletes being marginalized and undervalued. Almost all respondents agreed that their programs lacked diversity in their sports and should be emphasized more clearly. Amanda, who is a Division 3 swimmer and of Asian descent argued how race should more of a concern. She addressed her view with this idea:

“I feel more marginalized because of my race than my gender... that including with sports. In this day in age, we have to choose what we think is the bigger problem, is it gender or do we think it’s race.”

Amanda, who is currently a junior and Chinese, adamantly claimed that her college does not value her as much because of her race. When it came time to hold a spot for her on the travel team, her coach picked a senior, who is white, compared to her even though the senior is not as fast as her. She also emphasized how most of her team is predominantly white and how that could play into such racial issues. Alice, who is also Chinese and a junior, agreed and said:

“It’s so hard because you can’t exclude one without the other or rather you shouldn’t be.”

Alice specified and mentioned how it is not only difficult to be a woman, especially now during these times but also to be a person of color with that, whether in the sports culture or outside of it. Emily, who is Hispanic and in her junior year, concluded with this idea:

“Think of it like solving problems based on the resources you are given. As for my school, gender is not really an issue. Yeah, it exists, but it is not the big problem at my school. The bigger problem is the funding that my university has, I feel like the solutions they come up with, which there are not really any, there should be more focus on race within my sport and the athletic department.”

It is thought-provoking to see how different collegiate institutions compare and treat the issues behind race and gender. With the previous research provided, the term ‘race’ and racism are considered a powerful concept that even when they are the topic of debate, especially in sports media, still remain unproblematized (Hylton, 2009). Many of these female athletes are prime examples of the constant ridicule and discrimination by their institution because of their race. Because of this, many female athletes continue to feel pressured into fitting a certain stigma within their designated sport.

I was able to discuss further some important issues when concerning stigma and the fight for gender equality within sports. Ayesha is a junior at Fresno State. She is a Division 1 cross-country athlete and has been on the team for the last two years. Ayesha talked about some struggles she faced during her cross-country races as an African American female athlete and her experience as a transfer athlete.

“I felt like transferring schools was the easy part. I felt the team welcomed me with open arms and it was really nice. However, I did experience a difference in the treatment of certain races. There was a time I was warming up and stretching for my race and I overheard some parents on the sidelines talk about how I would ‘automatically win’ and how the race was ‘already unfair’. I was a bit shocked because I never had that problem before, even at my old school. It is unfortunate, however, that some people continue to think in certain ways because of my body build and the color of my skin... I did end up telling my coach about it after the race, who then talked to the parents.”

Ayesha, along with the several other respondents, has felt separated with her gender and race and addressed that both issues should be more of a discussion throughout all college administrations. Ayesha has felt discriminated against not only because of her race, but also because of the certain stigmas that come with being a strong athlete. As the previous research concerns, the stigma that comes with being an athlete has a more negative connotation with it (Parsons, 2013, p. 400). Some of these connotations are related to how a woman is perceived as an athlete. Women who have more of an athletic body and greater muscle apex, appear to be ‘too strong looking for a woman.’ When people see a tall person of color with an athletic build, they immediately assume they play basketball or run track. More specifically, gendered stigma and the physical appearance of athletes weighs a heavy burden on female athletes and can hurt them

because of how they are marginalized. However, athletes are not the only ones to share this burden of stigma and gender, but coaches experience inequalities throughout higher administration as well.

Coaching through Inequality

When it comes to sports, inequality between men and women just as prevalent throughout the coaching world. I interviewed two female coaches. Coach Rebecca has been an assistant coach for the men's and women's swim team at Hudson University for almost 10 years. Throughout her time at Hudson, she has traveled and assisted many competitions with the team and has provided coaching throughout the team's practices. While briefly talking with her, I asked her several questions that related to her experience as a coach and treatment from the athletic administration. I was surprised to hear some of the things we discussed and her reaction to certain questions that were asked. For example, when asked the question, "do you feel as though the athletics department at your university in general values your sport," Rebecca responded with a few interesting points.

"I really enjoy working at the University. My colleagues and students really make my job fun and not feel like work. Throughout my time here I have had the pleasure of coaching wonderful people in the very sport I grew up to love. The University has allowed me to use my knowledge of the sport to help our team grow and become the best it could be."

With this, I then asked if there was a specific moment where she felt undervalued compared to her male colleagues at the university. She responded with this certain example.

"Throughout the years, I would not say that the University intentionally tries to undermine me. However, especially more recently during a global pandemic, there have been noticeable ways

certain things are handled or addressed. Such things can relate to administrative meetings and the lack of inclusion for some staff events..."

Gaining a sense of perspective through a coach's lens showed how gender inequalities can even be shown through higher administration when it comes to the difference between how men and women are treated in the culture of sports.

Coach Sarah has been the head coach for the girls' lacrosse team at the Tompkins University for about 5 years. Roughly new to the university, Sarah has shown to be a positive impact on the girls' season. They recently qualified for the playoffs for the first time in almost 10 years and are excited for what lies ahead. The lacrosse team is on a Division 3 level, which means a majority of the players are not recruited and can potentially walk on the team based on their experience. Coach Sarah sheds light on how her inclusion in recent years has changed the team's ambiance.

"It is interesting to see how much of a difference I can be when it comes to just coaching. The girls would come to my office in between their classes and would tell me how much they have grown to love the sport more because of me. It really helps to put a smile on my face."

While proceeding with the interview, I asked Sarah if she felt represented in an equal way compared to her male colleague and if there was ever a specific time, she felt undervalued by the university or athletic department. Her response follows:

"It was almost intimidating at first coming into a whole new place with different people. The university was very welcoming, and my colleagues were very warm and welcoming upon my arrival. I guess when I use the word 'intimidating' I mean it more in a business aspect. I wanted to fit in, mesh well with everyone, especially with my counterpart [sport], the men's lacrosse

team. I tried hard to gain the approval of what my colleague had to say and kept referring to him to see what should work best for my team. With time I realized that would not always work, especially when it comes to how my girls play compared to the boys.”

From Sarah’s perspective, there is this overall sense of reliance on how one gender seems to be the more dominant. When regarding this realization, it is important to see how a woman can feel inferior in a culture that is dominated by men (Tjonndal, 2019, p. 87-88). Ultimately, learning and understanding that women and men should be treated equally in their own fields show how there is still a difference in treatment regarding the gender norms in sports. However, there seems to be a common ground for how to face and challenge the inequalities that these women all face, both coach and student alike.

The Power of a Team

Whether win or lose, all participants unanimously agreed that with the help and support of teammates and coaches, they can take on whatever challenges come their way in both academic and athletic areas. Even the coaches agreed that a team that has a strong relationship with one another, allows for the athletic experience to be more rewarding. Coach Rebecca had a few words to say on how constant support with teammates will create a positive environment.

“The girls are part of the reason I love my job. It’s almost a relief to see when the team gets along so well. They perform better, help motivate each other in and out of the water, and spread a positive light throughout the day. It makes my job even more rewarding to know that they support each other in every way and not just in the pool.”

All the athletes also agreed and believe that teammate support is very beneficial and rewarding not only during practice but outside the athletic environment as well. Student-athlete Amanda

agreed with this idea and expanded on how team bonding is essential to the flow of a great team overall.

“I think when you spend so much time with people, practicing the same routines over and over for hours a day, there will naturally be some sort of bond between teammates. We understand each other and value the time we share together. We all come from different backgrounds but come together through the sport we play. Some of my closest friends are my teammates and I am proud to say that because we understand what we go through each day and value the hard work we put in. I think having a teammate’s support helps motivate me to be a better person outside.”

Athlete Alice also expressed the value of what it means to be on a team and how that can positively influence a person’s life.

“I think you can take away a lot from being committed on a team. Teamwork is essential for everyday life, so being on my team has allowed me to learn the value of being a ‘team player’ and how I can improve myself in the future when working with future colleagues. I am very fortunate to be able to have the opportunities I have and would not be the person I am without my teammates and coaches.”

Although these female athletes still face the effects of being devalued throughout their administrations, the value of a team helps shape and build confidence and motivation in the classroom environment and throughout their respective sports. With the right determination and motivation, women can achieve anything that can be thrown their way.

Conclusion

History has shown time and time again, how women continue to rise from the gender inequalities they endure each day. Whether it was gaining the right to vote or being the first female to participate in the Olympics, women have thrived under the pressure society continues to throw their way. With the rise of media and broadcasting, women have utilized methods in their favor so that their voices and concerns can be heard. Female athletes continue to shed light on certain gender and race inequalities they face and are getting recognized through the support they receive from other teammates, coaches, and even non-athletes. Female athletes of color find themselves confronting discrimination on the intersection between the marginalization of race and gender to fight sexism and racism in sports that often fail to comprehensively address the intersecting pressures facing women of color athletes. Sports media continues to contribute to the culture where female athletes are considered second tier. With a culture that continues to reinforce unfounded gender stereotypes, supportive coaches and teammates help break the societal norms and encourage one another to stay focused in athletic areas. While uncovering the specific problems college intuitions have throughout the country, I learned that the most successful way to mitigate the negative impacts of marginalization of female athletes is through the help and encouragement of friends, coaches, and family. Because of the research limitations that were faced, predominantly due to COVID-19, I was not able to take the time to get to know some of these athletes and coaches and go further into depth with some of the questions that were asked. However, these limitations allowed for a different approach that was accessible to all the interviewees virtually and gave me a much clearer answer as to how vital communication with family, friends, and teammates is during times like a global pandemic. With the help and

encouragement from other teammates, female athletes can defy all gender disparities and stereotypes and stand as one powerful force both on and off the field.

“When you’re part of a team, you stand up for your teammates. Your loyalty is to them. You protect them through good and bad, because they’d do the same for you.”

~Yogi Berra

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