

## **Gender Equity in Sports: An Analysis of USA Today's Coverage of the 2005 NCAA Finals**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Newspaper coverage of women's sports still falls far short of that of horses and dogs. Given the explosion in involvement and interest by girls and women in sports since Title IX, it is unthinkable that the media coverage would be so sorely lacking. Media frames our perceptions and therefore the quantity and quality of media coverage of women's sports need to be examined. The argument has been used that, for example, during the fall football is the prevalent sport resulting in naturally more coverage of men's sports than women's. Our question addressed the "what if" the sports were the same? How would coverage then be handled? We selected the national newspaper, USA Today and examined 16 issues leading up to and through the 2005 NCAA men's and women's basketball finals. Overall findings show that men's coverage far exceeds women's as did the number of pictures.

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Given that our perceptions of our world are largely framed by newspapers and television, it is imperative that we examine the media's coverage of women's sporting events (Coakley, 2004; Miller & Levy, 1996; Koivula, 1999; Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). The public seldom questions the content, images, and representation of sports. As women's sports have developed into their own, we would assume that increased coverage has been part of the package, especially in light of the 1972 Title IX legislation and that the average consumer would simply assume the playing field, or media coverage in this case, has been leveled. That is not at all the case, neither in television nor newspaper coverage. Women-only sports stories account for less than 8

percent of the total sports stories in newspapers (Amateur, 2005). In several major market newspapers, including The New York Times, coverage of girls' and women's sports still fell below that of dogs and horses (Unger & Evans, 2005).

It has been argued that to compare percentage of the coverage of men's and women's sports on any given day or week is not a fair assessment of the coverage. For example, football is mainly a men's sport and, logically, there would indeed be more coverage of men's sports in the newspaper during football season given that no major women's sports are in season at that time. But what about the scenario of two identical sports played at close to the same time for an equivalent championship, for example the NCAA Final Four Championships? How would that coverage compare? Would the space given to the women's games be equal to that of the men's? One would expect that articles on local, state and regional teams would proliferate for both sexes. But what about our only national newspaper, USA Today? Elimination of regional bias is a given in that readership is nationwide. For our project we selected USA Today's coverage of the 2005 NCAA Division I basketball championships for men and women including both text coverage and pictures.

## **Procedure**

Twenty-six (26) issues or six weeks, the crucial weeks leading up to and immediately following the championship game, March 1 through April 6, 2005, of USA Today were examined to determine the amount and quality of coverage of the men's and women's NCAA basketball tournament. In the first stage of the research, we analyzed the front page banners and compared (1) the number of times the men's or women's NCAA tournament was mentioned, (2) the language used to describe the men's or women's upcoming games or teams, and (3) the number and focus of pictures. Secondly, we analyzed the percentage of sports coverage, text and pictures, of men's and women's games inside the Sports Section, including a separate analysis of the March Madness Preview 20 page insert. This analysis was divided into (1) the March 1 issue, (2) the following 23 issues from March 2-April 6, (3) the Special Preview section, and (4) the men's final and women's final issues. We also provide a table that lists the breakdown by issue, men vs. women, and text and pictures.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Front Page Banners: Text and Pictures**

The front page of a newspaper is the most compelling page in that it identifies the important stories on the inside sections and draws readers to certain items covered in that

issue. Of the 27 issues examined, 20 front page banners mentioned the NCAA tournament. Men's teams and information about men's tournament play were found on 18 of the 20 USA Today front pages (90%). Only 3 of the 20 front page banners mentioned the women's tournament. The men's tournament play was covered beginning in the March 1 issue. Coverage included phrases like "Madness Starts Early No. 1 Illinois aims to stay unbeaten"; Poll: Illinois still on top, 1"; and "March to Madness Giant killers unleashed by expanded bracket."

Given the fact that the men's and women's tournaments began within two days of each other (men's first round began March 17 and women's began March 19), there would be some expectation of equitable coverage for both events on the front page banners. That was not the case. The women's tournament was not even mentioned on a front page banner until two weeks after the men's coverage began, with "Women 16E" simply indicating the page for the women's bracket. This page number for the women's brackets appeared five more times, but women's teams and games were mentioned in only three of the front page banners and included (1) Pat Summitt's quest to break Dean Smith's victory record, (2) the list of which teams advanced to the final four, and (3) the Baylor championship information.

All 18 banners included pictures of men's players in images showing aggression and excitement. These images were depicted, for example, with high fives by players, shots driving to the basket, and scrambling on the floor for loose balls. In contrast, of the three pictures relating specifically to women, only one is similar in showing the aggressive action exhibited in men's photos. This particular one shows Lindsay Bowen driving to the basket, while the other two are of Baylor's team after the championship game and of Coach Pat Summitt.

### Sports Section Coverage: Text and Pictures

#### First issue on March 1

We decided to examine the first issue on March 1 separately, the prelude to March Madness and the countdown to the NCAA Final Four Championship. In this issue there were 12 pictures of men's teams and only one women's. Additionally, total column inches devoted to men's coverage was 803 and women's 86. For girls' and women's athletes, coaches and supporters, this issue would be more appropriately labeled the beginning of March Sadness.

#### Issues from March 2 through April 4

The second comparison was of the following 23 issues from March 2 through April 6, with the exception of the men's and women's championship games coverage which were treated in a separate analysis. In these 23 issues, there were a total of 252 pictures of men's teams and 84 of women's teams. Total content coverage was 13,456 column inches for men and 3,848 column inches for women.

### Special Preview Section on March 14

The Special Preview section consisted of a 20 page insert devoted entirely to the NCAA college basketball March Madness. This was a bonus section in addition to the regular March 14 Sport Section. Before glancing at the Special Preview it was hoped that coverage of women's teams would finally catch up in terms of quantity or at least be highlighted equally within the bonus coverage. However that was not the case. In fact, the opposite was true. The coverage of the women's tournament did not even garner attention until page 16 of the 20-page insert and only one picture related to women's teams, players or coaches. Men had 16 pages of coverage with 1875 column inches to the women's 480. There were 27 pictures of men's teams, players and coaches. The front page of this section alone had 5 pictures of men and the only one small picture of the women.

Again this huge discrepancy in the overall coverage in this special section devoted to the NCAA championship begs the question why. Are women not interested? Women's sports have no fans? Are these not serious athletes? In response to such questions, one should know that there were almost 30,000 in attendance at the women's championship game and many of these collegiate players move on to play in the Women's National Basketball Association as professionals.

### Finals

Coverage of the men's championship game included 810 column inches with 12 pictures while the women's championship game had only 2 pictures and 114 column inches. Both games were highlighted on the front page of the Sports Section with large color pictures and headline type. But the difference in total coverage in text and pictures for this championship game again warrants the attention of female athletes, coaches, supporters and fans.

### Conclusion

We grow weary of these findings repeated year in and year out. The excuses of newspaper publishers, sports editors and writers no longer are acceptable. The coverage simply does not mirror the achievements of these elite athletes or female athletes of any age or sport nor does it reflect the interest of fans and advertisers. Girls and women of all ages and sports need to demand more equitable coverage and be a catalyst for change in the way things have always been done.

Table 1 Comparison of Text and Pictures Men vs. Women

Issue	Women's Text	Men's Text	Women: Men (percentage)	Women's Pictures	Men's Pictures	Women: Men (percentage)
March 1	86	803	10.7%	1	12	8.3%
March 2	144	445	32.4%	1	6	16.7%
March 3	41	198	20.7%	1	3	33.3%
March 4	126	330	38.2%	2	6	33.3%
March 7	61	471	13.0%	1	13	7.6%
March 8	63	589	10.7%	1	7	14.3%
March 9	215	199	108%	2	3	66.7%
March 10	44	413	10.7%	1	6	16.7%
March 11	61	369	16.5%	2	8	25.0%
March 14	5	252	2.0%	1	9	11.1%
PREVIEW	480	1876	25.6%	1	27	3.7%
March 15	371	350	106.0%	13	5	260.0%
March 16	30	550	5.5%	3	11	27.3%
March 17	104	1064	9.8%	1	20	5.0%
March 18	258	1121	23.0%	4	23	17.4%
March 21	115	1146	10.0%	2	36	5.6%
March 22	312	435	71.7%	5	7	71.4%
March 23	243	525	46.3%	4	8	50.0%
March 25	133	976	13.6%	5	17	29.4%
March 28	215	818	26.3%	5	14	35.7%
March 29	291	200	146.0%	6	1	600.0%
March 30	120	203	59.0%	2	2	100.0%
March 31	142	460	30.9%	4	11	36.4%
April 1	315	731	43.1%	9	10	90.0%
April 4	269	746	36.1%	5	13	38.5%
Men's Final	113	810	14.0%	2	12	16.7%
Women's Final	465	63	738.1%	8	1	800.0%

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