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“UNSUNG ATHLETES”: COVERING WOMEN’S SPORTS FOR CHICAGO
NEWSPAPERS, 1970s-1980s

A Dissertation in
Mass Communications

by
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ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, women’s sport in the United States saw several watershed moments. In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, an education amendment that would lead to an exponential increase in girls’ and women’s participation in sport. A few weeks later, Soviet gymnast Olga Korbut dominated the televised coverage of Munich Olympics, conveying images about femininity and athleticism in popular imagination to audiences in the United States. The next year, the “Battle of the Sexes,” Billie Jean King’s tennis match against Bobby Riggs, became a symbol of women’s fight against sexist attitudes and practices in sport. These moments, although credited with spearheading social change and challenging cultural norms, gave only temporary visibility to women’s sport. Ultimately, these efforts did not lead to a substantial shift in gender representations, nor did they challenge gender norms in the sports journalism industry.

In this dissertation, I draw upon oral history interviews to illuminate how journalists remembered women’s sport during this time of social change. I interviewed sports journalists who throughout their careers extensively covered women’s sports for their respective newspapers. By centering the voices of journalists, this story foregrounds memories of everyday lived experiences of covering women’s sports. With a focus on one media market, Chicago, the dissertation offers an in-depth analysis of the social, legislative, cultural, and institutional factors that shaped women’s sports coverage in the 1970s and 1980s.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1974, Paul Logan, sports reporter for the Arlington Heights Daily Herald, a paper targeting Chicago suburbanites, wrote his regular column for the first page of the sports section. As usual, he wrote about women’s sports, but this time, he told a personal story. In an article titled “Will sports ever replace a Barbie doll?”, Logan outlined the plan of action for drawing his seven-year-old daughter Mia into sports: “This Saturday will be my first experiment in indoctrinating Mia. She’s agreed to go to the girls’ state tennis tournament with me.” The next step would be to take Mia to a gymnastics meet. “You see, Mia kind of likes Olga Korbut,” he wrote. “Although Olga won’t be there, somebody might catch her attention and impress her.” Logan wanted his daughter to realize that “it’s okay for girls to be athletes.” In the 1970s, when Logan wrote this article, Illinois sponsored state tournaments in very few, though an increasing number of, sports for girls. After the implementation of national and state legislation that prohibited discrimination based on sex, schools, including those in the Chicago area, began to provide more opportunities for girls in athletics. On the national level, professional female athletes such as Billie Jean King advocated for equal pay and fought for greater social acceptance. On the international level, (some) women’s sports burst into the spotlight. Following Soviet gymnast Olga Korbut’s 1972 Munich Olympic performance, the United States saw a rise in popularity of aesthetic sports in girls’ participation and in spectatorship. The Daily Herald’s longtime writer Logan capitalized upon these
transformations as he conspired to expose his daughter to a “sport” other than playing with Barbie dolls.¹

This story offers a personal account of a sports journalist who not only followed the changing attitudes of the time but by encouraging his daughter to participate in sports, also actively kept up with these changes. Beyond the personal account, the story provides an insight into several trends in 1970s sport and sports journalism. In introducing his daughter to the readers, Logan subtly hinted at dominant gender norms, which rendered sport as an inherently male domain, as boys’ playground. He also exposed the discriminatory practices against girls and women, which manifested in limited opportunities for competition. While he recognized the cultural and organizational barriers that prevented girls from participating in sport, Logan also importantly indicated a shift toward the inclusion of girls and women. There, he saw an opening for change. Finally, Logan used his position as a sports journalist to bring visibility to gender issues in sport. Although this article told the story one girl from suburban Chicago in one local newspaper, it represents several tendencies about the status of girls and women in sport in the United States.

This article, in its message of girls’ empowerment through sport, was an exception. In this time period, women’s sports coverage that news media both in Chicago and nationally systemically excluded girls’ and women’s sports from its coverage. When women did appear on the sports pages, the journalists dismissed their athletic ability, positioned them as less than men, and emphasized gendered traits—none of which, ultimately, resulted in substantive progress. In other words, at a time when nationwide
social change transformed institutional structures and gender norms, the sports journalism industry remained deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures.

I focus on the 1970s and the 1980s for several reasons. One important reason lies in that the women’s movement and the civil rights movement of the 1960s brought about changes in the institutional organization of athletics. These changes further developed in the 1970s. In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, a federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex in educational institutions. As a consequence, girls’ and women’s opportunities in interscholastic sport exponentially increased. However, the process toward eliminating sexism ran into several barriers. Advocates of women’s sport encountered resistance from (mostly male) athletic directors and the courts in implementing legislations. These debates continued well into the 1980s, when in 1987 Congress finally issued the Civil Rights Restoration Act, determining that athletics constituted an educational program and thus, Title IX applied. In relation to Title IX history, the 1970s and 1980s provide a fruitful site of analysis of how the news media responded to the increasing participation opportunities and ideological conflicts around legislative changes.²

The socio-cultural changes that transformed attitudes about women’s roles in the society seeped into the sports realm. Tracking a 3,500-year history of women’s inclusion in sport, Betty Spears wrote in 1978 that after a long time of exclusion “for the first time, social, economic, and technological forces are opening the possibility of sport for women as a reality instead of a myth.” Acknowledging that old myths die slowly and new myths emerge, Spears argued that the decades after the 1970s would be “critical in the interpretation of women’s sport and the education of the general public to the acceptance
of sport for women.” Indeed, the cultural shifts that challenged stereotypical notions about women’s bodies and athletic competence mobilized scientific inquiries as well as common sense understandings, which found that women may not actually lose their uteruses if they participate in sport. In the 1970s, participation for women in sport became a reality.³

But, as typical of social transformation, change did not simply lead to linear progress. The late 1970s and 1980s saw a shift in popular culture from celebrating political gains to backlash against feminism. Claiming the end of women’s revolution, including revolution in sport, US politics took a distinctively conservative turn, resulting in attacks on women’s rights and women’s empowerment. In 1991, Susan Faludi wrote in the landmark Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women that the media “did more than order up a quiet burial for the feminist corpse.” Distinctly declaring the end of feminism, the media introduced new commercialized rhetoric, which in coverage of women in sport manifested as the beauty-myth. The beauty-myth, sport historian Jaime Schultz observes, idealized femininity at the expense of sport competition. Fitness replaced athleticism, with cultural values idealizing aesthetic benefits rather than empowerment through “serious sport involvement.” Thus, the setback in the 1980s serves an integral role in understanding the consequences of the 1970s transformations in the coverage of women’s sports.⁴

My choice to focus on the 1970s and 1980s is driven by practical as well as theoretical reasons. The sports journalists I talked to most actively wrote in those two decades. Some started in sports journalism earlier and many continued into the 1990s, 2000s and even into today, but they overlapped most profoundly in their work during the
1970s and 1980s. I chose to stop my analysis of coverage of women’s sports and journalist’ experiences thereof with the 1988 Seoul Olympics for several reasons. Firstly, all the women I talked (four of them) got out of sports journalism by that time. Secondly, the global sports landscape underwent a major change. The fall of the Soviet Union shifted geopolitical power relations. As state support for countries in the former “Eastern Block” declined, US women began to see more success in the international, and especially Olympic, realm. Finally, in the 1990s, media representations of women’s sports introduced modified versions of dominant gender ideologies. Scholars found that the media both heralded women in their success, especially when that success bolstered the reputation of their countries, but also more prominently featured female athletes as sex objects. As such, expanding my analysis into the 1990s would have demanded that I engage with an additional generation of sports journalists, consider a drastic geopolitical shift, and incorporate additional “generation” of scholarship in sport studies. This task remains one to pursue in the future.5

Several factors drove my decision to focus specifically on the 1970s and 1980s: 1) Title IX and the debates regarding its first fifteen years, 2) the expansion of participation opportunities for women in sport, 3) the complicated cultural norms that took drastic turns in these two decades, and 4) the global power relations, which shaped US sport. I also, I admit, made a pragmatic choice to limit the analysis on the two decades in order to focus in more depth upon a smaller group of sports journalists and upon a manageable time period in the history of women’s sports coverage.

The 1970s tidal wave in US society, by standards of simple logic, should have reached the sports media industry. Many feminist scholars believed it would. As such, I
was interested in learning more about the change in women’s sports coverage that never happened. Or it happened to such minimal extent as to warrant serious concern by those, including myself, who are invested in gender justice in sport. Plethora of studies on representations of women in sport come to the same conclusion that, even after the boom in participation, “women athletes continue to be underrepresented and trivialized by the popular media while men have been highly visible and glorified.” This observation permeates studies from as early as the 1970s and into the 2010s, in which scholars base their analyses upon the same assumption: Women’s sports coverage should have become better since the 1970s. Although I do not seek to find evidence for why the quantity and quality of women’s sports coverage over time has been so inadequate, I am deeply concerned with the relative lack of “progress” in women’s representation in media. As such, I set out to better understand the mechanisms behind women’s sports coverage during the time period that could have, and perhaps should have, brought about institutional and cultural changes in gender relations in the sport media industry. To achieve that goal, reading newspaper content did not suffice. Beyond content, I decided to find those individuals who extensively covered or oversaw coverage of women’s sports in the last few decades of the 20th century.

For this dissertation, I conducted oral history interviews with sports journalists, men and women, who regularly covered women’s sports throughout the 1970s and 1980s in order to bring visibility to their experiences with women’s sports. Sports journalists who wrote about women’s sports occupy an epistemically privileged social position as “knowers” of gender-based oppression because of their relationships with a marginalized social group in sport media. In fact, via their work (as editors, as reporters, as writers),
these journalists inadvertently disrupted the perpetual invisibility of female athletes on the sports pages. Their accounts help identify institutional structures and reveal how sports journalists, as active agents, negotiated their roles against these structures. Their memories, which are deeply personal, open possibilities for new interpretations of the past. Reflecting upon their lives, and specifically upon their own journalistic work, sports journalists bring an in-depth human element—an element essential to the preservation of human existence—into the history of sport and the history of women’s sport.7

Previous research in feminist scholarship provides useful frameworks upon which this inquiry builds. Exposing forces of patriarchy, these accounts interrogate the factors that contributed to the exclusion, trivialization, and sexualization of women in sport media—in other words, the constraints.8 In this dissertation, I engage in a dialogue with this scholarship, but do so by beginning not with the constraints, the problems, or the ideologies that contributed to gender-based oppression. Rather, I begin the story from sports journalists lived experiences. I focus, more specifically, on how sports journalists functioned within contemporary social and cultural conditions. Considering the issues in women’s sports coverage during this time, I am not willing to altogether bypass well-established interpretations in feminist scholarship, but I do believe that sports journalists’ voices can, at the very least, provide an alternative view of trends identified in prior studies. Based on the above outlined purpose, I ask the following questions:

1) How did sports journalists experience covering women’s sports in the 1970s and 1980s?

2) How do sports journalists’ memories correspond with narratives about coverage of women’s sports in feminist scholarship??
3) How do sports journalists remember major events in women’s sport history?

To answer these questions, I situate the research in metropolitan-area Chicago, a city that historians herald as a central location in US journalism and US sport history. In the 1970s and 1980s, Chicago’s newspaper and sport landscape mirrored that of other big cities in the US. As the third-largest media market in the country, Chicago served as home to the Chicago Tribune, a typical big-city paper with a sports section “essentially similar to the sports page of papers in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Detroit, and San Francisco.” Except for the coverage of collegiate (men’s sports), which can be attributed to the presence of the Big Ten Conference, the Chicago Tribune reflected patterns equivalent to those of other big-city newspapers. The city had one other major newspaper, the Chicago Sun-Times. The Tribune and the Sun-Times similar to competing papers in New York and Boston had “obvious differences in format and emphasis.” The migration of city residents to the suburbs, and the subsequent emergence of suburban papers, likewise reflected national trends. Though uniquely situated in the Midwest within a saturated sports market, Chicago, in many ways, resembled characteristics of other big US cities and, thus, could serve as an example of larger national trends in sports journalism.9

Chicago is also unique in relation to sport. As sport historian Gerald Gems writes, “Chicago provided more than just a setting for sport.” In the city’s history, sport served an “integrative function.” Sport and sporting communities allowed for the racially and ethnically diverse groups to assimilate and to create culture through sport. The study of Chicago, Gems asserts “allows the opportunity to assess not only the patterns of development, but the pluralistic meaning of sport.” Not only is Chicago a window into a
local sport landscape, but so is sport integral for understanding the city. When the Chicago Historical Society (currently called the Chicago History Museum) set up a 6,000-square-foot exhibition titled *Chicago Sports! You Shoulda’ Been There* exhibition, curator John Russick stated that “Looking at Chicago’s history through its sports, we gain an understanding of the intricate social relationships at work across both time and neighborhood boundaries.” He added, “And sports, in turn, help reveal the larger history of the city.” Documenting the history of sport in Chicago provides an insight into what it means to be a Chicagoan. The study of sports journalism in Chicago has both national and local significance.10

Contextualizing sports journalists’ memories within scholarship in fields of feminist media studies, sports media, journalism history, and sport history, this dissertation makes explicit connections between social gender norms, gendered dynamics in sports media production and gendered outcomes in coverage in the context of Chicago. As historian Patricia Vertinsky argues feminist sport historians ought to “articulate the myriad ways in which sport—a system that still privileges the male body as superior—does not reflect social and gender realities but rather plays a key role in constructing them.” Recognizing sports media as an integral element of the system that upholds hierarchies of power, feminist scholars (including myself) attend to the ways in which the media perpetuate the dominance of men and the oppression of women. Understandably so. Despite the changes, the sports media industry predominantly employs white men, adheres to masculinist values, and perpetuates sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and ableism. But throughout history, the sports journalism industry also functioned as an avenue for change. Feminist scholarship must also look beyond narratives of
discrimination to uncover moments of empowerment—moments when journalists, through their actions, relationships and writing, actively contributed to the disruption of patriarchy in sport and sports media. Journalists’ memories, as retold here, highlight the few yet noteworthy moments that advanced the status of women in sport. Though with many limitations, this dissertation places a brick upon the solid foundation of feminist sports media scholarship and opens questions for further inquiries in working toward gender justice.11

**Research Methodology, Research Process**

In this dissertation, I take a socio-historical approach to studying gender issues in sports journalism, attending to both social structures and historical processes. I draw upon foundational texts in feminist media studies, most notably Lisbet van Zoonen’s *Feminist Media Studies* and Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner and Carole Fleming’s *Women and Journalism*. I most heavily rely upon the works of feminist scholars who study specifically sports media, including Pamela Creedon, Marie Hardin and Erin Whiteside. Feminist (sports) media theories informed the questions I asked in this dissertation and helped to identify patterns during the analysis process.

**Oral History Interviews**

Methodologically, I follow tenets of historical work within the field of mass communication, though I do so from a feminist theoretical perspective. Although I
deviate from William Sloan and Michael Stamm’s assertion that in history “a theoretical framework must take a backseat,” I take their observation that the “point of history is the desire to understand the complexity, contingency, and human agency more than it is to develop a generalizable theories of human behavior.” My intent, thus, is to provide a deeper look into a particular phenomenon (factors in women’s sports coverage) within a specific context (Chicago) rather than to make normative assertions about the state of the industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Informed by feminist theories, I reject the idea of a knowable reality, and instead consider research as highly interpretive.\(^{12}\)

For the purposes of this inquiry, I primarily rely upon oral history interviews to examine how sports journalists remembered women’s sport and coverage in the 1970s and 1980s. Oral history interviews do not grant factual knowledge about the past, nor do they deliver an objective account of what happened. Rather, they provide means to construct memories about the past. Historian Lynn Abrams argues in oral histories people “tell the past as it appears to them.”\(^{13}\) Based on my theoretical orientation as a feminist scholar, I do not see oral history as an “archival practice” that functions to “fill in the gaps” in a historical record. Instead, I believe that oral history can “illuminate lived experiences in a way that studying official documents cannot. The sharing of these lived experiences has the potential to disrupt historical narratives and, thereby, transform record of the past.\(^{14}\) As Linda Shopes and Bruce Stave wrote,

> It is the personal voice that gives oral history much of its power: narrators are able to speak publically and for the record about experiences that have been ignored or denied.\(^{15}\)
The oral history narrator does not merely add to the historical record, but “negotiates his or her role within the historical record.” More than merely recollections of the past, oral history interviews, according to feminist historian Susan Armitage “can tell us not only how people preserved meat but whether the process was fun or drudgery, whether it was accompanied by a sense of pride or failure.” Specifically to this research, oral history interviews reveal not only how newspapers and sport journalist covered women’s sports, but also how they felt about covering women’s sports—whether they felt resentment or joy.

The value of oral history according to oral historian Alessandro Portelli, lies in its ability to “establish, through memory and narrative, what the past means to the present.” Through this connection, memory reveals sports journalists’ unique recollections of women’s sports coverage beyond textual representations. Feminist media scholar Shayla Thiel-Stern and her colleagues observe that “memory provides a powerful and sometimes mysterious means of binding oneself to a sense of time, place, purpose, and community, and when shared, it can illuminate lived experiences in a way that studying official documents cannot.” Memory, thus, offers a sense of continuity and a sense of self for those who engages in the process of remembering.

Although historians approach memory with skepticism for it lacks reliability in relation to factual information, historian Lynn Abrams sees much value in listening to how people tell the past is a “source of interest” for historians who perceive the “vulnerability of memory” not as a “problem,” but an “opportunity.” The gaps in memory and the recollection of seemingly minor details reveal much about the interviewees’ experiences, values, and beliefs. Historian Melissa Walker says, “The way narrators
frame stories about the past tells us much about the way they view the world they live in today and the things they feel have been lost in the wake of … change.” Feminist historians refer to the process of recollecting the past as “re-membering” because this process is “not only an affirmation of one’s personal story but also a remining or recovering of that same history through the story telling process.” Sports journalists’ stories about the past are, therefore, deeply connected to their sense of self in the present.  

Sports journalists’ memories offer more than just biographical accounts. Memories of events, situations, and encounters also reveal sports journalists relationships with their colleagues, editors, sources, and readers, thereby providing insights into the operations of the sports journalism industry. Journalism and mass communication historians have used oral histories to find out about institutional norms, organizing efforts, and decision-making processes that archival materials simply cannot capture. Oral history interviews, at the very least, offer a first-person interpretation of technological, legislative, and political changes that affect the journalism industry. Scholarship that draws upon oral history interviews, especially with those who are socially marginalized, can also uncover the crucial historical contributions of those who worked toward social justice and generated change in gender and race relations. Journalism and mass communication historians have used oral history interviews with media professionals to unveil efforts otherwise omitted from institutional records. For instance, Mike Conway relied on oral histories to document how broadcasters remembered the presence and significance of television at the 1948 political conventions in Philadelphia; journalism historian Naeemah Clark used oral history interviews to bring
visibility to how the women who founded Action for Children’s Television implemented change in children’s television programming and influenced policy, while Gwyn Mellinger studied the formal newsroom desegregation efforts from the perspective of African-American activists. Similarly, oral history interviews with sports journalists can provide a more complete account of structural changes and motivations behind these structural changes in newsrooms. Individually, sports journalists’ memories serve as personal accounts of the journalistic process. When analyzed collectively, in conversation with each other, these memories bring into life the newsroom cultures, interpersonal dynamics, values, and norms absent from historical archives.19

In this dissertation, oral history interviews with sports journalists who covered women’s sports offer alternative account of the pasts in several ways. First, through sports journalists’ life stories, this dissertation makes an explicit connection between journalists’ relationships to sport, path into sports journalism, career experiences, and women’s sport. This approach is important because journalists identified their childhood experiences as salient in shaping their later attitudes toward women’s sport. Second, while other studies make connections between gendered industry structures and content outcomes, sports journalists here share stories not only about content generally, but about their very own articles specifically. In other words, their memories provide insight into the reporting and writing process of a particular article, with in-depth reflection upon their choices.20

Third, although Chicago newspapers appear as sources of analysis in scholarly research, this dissertation focuses only on Chicago papers and thereby reveals how journalists perceived other newspapers, how competition influenced their own paper, and
how changes in the Chicago newspaper landscape impacted coverage of women’s sport. Finally, with the focus on coverage of women’s sport, this research challenged journalists to think about their contributions to social change. Scholarship that relies on interviews with sports journalists, with attention to gender-related barriers, serves as the theoretical context of this analysis. Emphasizing the ways in which sports journalists broke down these barriers to further the status of women in sports coverage, this dissertation recognizes sports journalists’ actions, accomplishments, and contributions to what could be considered feminist agendas in sport.

**Recruitment and Interview Procedures**

To identify the journalists who covered women’s sports for Chicago newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s, I employed two strategies. First, based on my education in journalism and athletic career in Chicago, I already knew some of the journalists whose voices would become integral to this project. Through these connections, I was able to gather access to others. As most of my initial contacts used to work for the Tribune, they helped me get in touch with their former colleagues, which allowed me to gather a comprehensive understanding of the Tribune’s environment. My contacts with the Daily Herald journalists came from a professional conference where a sports journalist, also an academic, approached me and connected me to others from the paper. In other words, I primarily recruited informants through what qualitative scholars refer to as “snowball sampling technique” whereby one contact lead to another. Second, I accessed the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times and the Chicago Defender archives to identify
journalists who regularly covered women’s sports. Through this method, I located Sun-Times sports journalists and inquired about Chicago Defender journalists. With the help of my athletic and journalistic contacts, I was, once again, able to reach additional interviewees. Throughout the interviewing process, I inquired about others and often took upon the recommendation of my interviewees in contacting sports journalists whose work significantly contributed to the visibility of women’s sports in the Chicago sports pages.

I conducted a total of fourteen interviews: thirteen during the summer of 2014 and one in November 2014. Depending on interviewee availability and current location, nine interviews occurred in person and five over the phone. Before each in-person interview, I conducted a preliminary phone interview with the journalists. I sent all interviews all questions in advance for review and reviewed their articles (if available) prior to conducting the interview. The interviews lasted between half an hour (some phone interviews) and an hour and a half (some in-person interviews). All in-person interviews occurred in Chicago, except for the interview with Linda Kay, which I conducted in Montreal. Upon my visit to Chicago and Montreal, I accommodated the interviewees and their comfort levels by allowing them to pick a place for the interview. All except for Bob Frisk, who invited me to his home, chose to be interviewed in a public place, including a quiet restaurant, library, conference room, or office. Although the interviewees did not express concern over privacy, I sought out interview places that allowed for it. The interviews in the library, conference room and offices occurred behind closed doors. To verify accuracy, I offered to each interviewee to send them the interview transcript. Some of them accepted the offer, and so I sent them the transcript in an email attachment, while others indicated no interest in reviewing the transcript.
I asked all interviewees the same set of foundational questions and—depending upon their social identity, experience, and job description—a set of personalized questions. The questions belonged to three main categories. First, I asked them broad questions about their background (i.e., upbringing, family, role of sports growing up, and interest in sports journalism). Then, I asked journalists a series of questions about their careers (i.e., major milestones, positions held, role as a sports journalist) followed by personalized questions about their work in women’s sports. I asked all journalists to reflect upon the priorities of the sports department at their respective newspapers, relationship with colleagues and general environment in the newsroom. I also asked the journalists to talk about what they saw as important events and athletes in the history of women’s sports, stories about women’s sports they have written or remembered and about Title IX. Depending upon the sports journalist’s focus, I often asked about specific events or athletes, which based upon newspaper archives I knew they covered extensively. For instance, some sports journalists wrote regularly about the Chicago Hustle, the women’s professional basketball team; others wrote about softball, while one journalist served as a newspaper’s primary Olympic writer. As I illustrate in subsequent chapters, the journalists often remembered sporting events and athletes that are rarely documented while failing to remember events sport historians would now consider “significant” in the history of women’s sport. Further, in light of the scholarship on women’s exclusion from sports departments, I asked the women to reflect upon their experiences as the “first” female sports journalists at their papers. I also asked the men to talk about what they remembered about their female colleagues and about the status of women in sports journalism at the time. In closing, I asked each journalist to reflect upon
the major issues for women’s sport in relation to media today and offered that they further elaborate on anything else I did not cover.

Although I prepared a set questions in advance and ensured throughout the interview to ask those, I found the task of sticking to the questions nearly impossible. As the journalists saw the questions in advance, many decided to answer several of them at once. This was particularly true for the questions about upbringing. Further, as they recounted the past, the journalists often asked whether they could deviate from the neatly outlined list of questions and jump to one that they particularly wanted to answer. Most often, the conversation did not go off topic but more in-depth about particular experiences. Although some of the answers reflected larger patterns documented in scholarship on sports media and on women’s sport, many did not, which led me to further exploration and more questions about a particular phenomenon. As I learned more about the 1970s and 1980s sports journalism environment, I became better able to prepare with follow-up questions that would give me a more thorough understanding of the journalists’ experiences. This was particularly the case with changes in the Chicago newspaper landscape, which I discuss in Chapter 5. I also found that sports journalists gladly talked not only about themselves and their own contributions to women’s sports coverage, but also about the contributions of their colleagues. Because I approached several interviewees upon the recommendation of others, and some of them worked together for decades, they pointed me toward their colleagues’ work and collectively painted a comprehensive picture about the different roles journalists occupied in the sports department and specifically in relation to women’s sport.
Considering the personal and spontaneous nature of oral history interviews, and in the case that the journalists knew each other, I took the recommendation of scholars who conduct oral history interviews to “protect the interviewee from any embarrassment that the interviewing technique might engender.” Because the purpose of oral history is typically to document a narrator’s life, the researchers rarely grant anonymity to their participants. Before the interviews began, however, I gave the interviewees an option on the consent form to indicate whether they wanted their names to be associated with the transcript. I further informed them that they can choose make the transcripts partially anonymous. In that case, the interviewees would indicate during the interview or when reviewing the transcripts if they wanted to keep any information undisclosed. Sports journalists, and journalists in general, I find are a unique population for interviewing not only because their jobs require publicity, but because, perhaps more than any other group of people, they are familiar and comfortable with interviews. As such, some of the journalists, not only gave me permission to use their names but actually requested that I do in order to give them attribution.

That said, I offered the anonymity clause in case the interviewees reveal information that could potentially harm them or their relationships to former/current colleagues. I speculated based on prior research that newsroom dynamics did not escape the social dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, some of the women I interviewed hesitated in talking about their experiences of discrimination in the newsroom. A couple of them asked that I not disclose particular (traumatic) instances. Even though oral historians believe that excluding parts of the transcript stands in contrast to the very purpose of oral history to preserve the full account as to use it for archival material, I
believe that *including* that information does not only violate trust with the interviewees, but stands in stark opposition to feminist ethics.\(^{22}\)

Feminist scholars disagree on what constitutes as an inherently feminist methodology, but throughout the interviewing process, I sought to follow at least some of the well-established standards in feminist research. Considering the systemic erasure of women from journalism history, the first step I took was to include women sports journalists in the project. In her early work, feminist historian Sherna Gluck stated that oral history with women is a “feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist” because the interview process itself validates historically erased women’s experiences. Others, disagree. Feminist historian Susan Geiger asserts that women’s oral histories “are not inherently feminist or is the telling necessarily a feminist act.” Based upon my theoretical frameworks and aim toward gender justice, I do believe that my interviews with women journalists were, in fact, a feminist act in itself.\(^{23}\)

In my interviewing, I paid particular attention to the gendered ways in which sports journalists, men and women, tell stories of the past. Feminist scholars have found that women tend to underestimate their contributions to history, while men tend to overstate their contributions. In fact, I encountered this with one woman’s story in particular and, with this awareness, I sought to follow up with questions that would allow for gaging a deeper understanding of sports journalists’ attitudes beyond the superficial proclamations about the importance of their stories.\(^{24}\)

Importantly, I strongly adhered to tenets of feminist methodology in centering women’s sport in the questions I asked about sports journalists’ experiences. Keeping the focus on women’s sports was harder than I anticipated. Although the journalists knew
that the research focused specifically on women’s sports, they often defaulted to talking about their work with men’s sports. While their stories about men’s sports reveal much about the history of sport and journalism, journalists’ retelling of these stories also exposes how journalists hierarchize sports. A feminist approach allowed me to detect how ideas about gender subtly and overtly manifested during the interview process and to attend to the ways in which sports journalists, at times, reproduced the exclusion and marginalization of women’s sports in the interviews. These tenets of feminist methodology shaped the recruitment and interviewing process. As I discuss below, feminist frameworks informed other stages of the research process.

The Journalists

The fourteen journalists interviewed belonged to a diverse range of social groups based on their gender and age. Despite the lack of women in sports departments in Chicago, I was able to interview four women who worked at two different papers and worked together a few years. This overlap allowed me to see similarities as well as differences in their experiences and draw a comparison between the status of men and the status of women in sports journalism. Considering that I focused on a roughly twenty-year time period, the journalists ranged in age from 57 to 78, which means that they entered the sports journalism industry in different eras. I do not explicitly address age difference, but the variety in age allowed me to write a continuous narrative and detect change. Where the experiences of one journalist ended (due to leaving the profession), another one’s begun.
The journalists I interviewed held a variety of job titles and worked for four newspapers. This proved particularly helpful in understanding institutional values and practices. I interviewed at least one person from each paper in who used to be in decision-making position, either sports editor or associate sports editor, who oversaw and delegated assignments. Others worked as beat writers or general assignment sports writers, while one journalist served as a stringer (a journalist on contract). Editors and reporters who worked for the same paper often articulated similar attitudes toward women’s sport—at times they even used the same wording. But other times, editors’ and reporters’ memories clashed. These consistencies and inconsistencies reveal oral histories’ potential to complicate stories about the past.

Most of the journalists I talked to worked for the Tribune (the Tribune’s sports department was also larger than that of any other paper in the city), though some of them came from the Chicago Daily News or from the Chicago Sun-Times. A couple of journalists worked only for the Sun-Times, a primarily metropolitan-area paper for an extended period of time. Others worked for the (Arlington Heights) Daily Herald, a suburban paper, which gradually expanded during that time period. As I discuss later, these papers vastly differed in scope, focus, circulation and readership.

Feminist scholars have debated over the diversity of voices in a small sample as well as over the epistemic significance of social locations. Sociologist Lynn Weber Cannon recognizes that “in-depth analysis of small homogenous samples is key to discovering the unique quality of subjects’ lives” and helps identifying common patterns, but argues that such homogeneity can also “block discovery of the diversity of human experience.”25 With this group of journalists, I was able to identify common patterns in
experience as well as those that transcended social locations. Importantly, I did not treat individual journalists as spokespersons for their social groups. Rather, consistent with feminist standpoint theory, I considered social location (and individuals’ personal experiences as structured by social locations) as a possible structuring force of knowledge production about sports journalists’ experiences, attitudes, and values about women’s sport. Standpoint theory does not claim one situated and partial perspective but recognizes multiple realities that sports journalists inhabit. Thus, I do not strive to write a meta-narrative of sports journalists’ experiences in relation to women’s sports, nor do I believe that there is a “truth” that can comprehensively reflect their social realities. Instead, I apply feminist standpoint theory to my methodology to engage in, what political scientist Susan Hekman calls, a “systemic analysis of the institutions of patriarchy” based on the recognition that knowledge is situated, partial, and relational.26

Feminist theorizing about the importance of social location predominantly focuses on women’s epistemic privilege (due to their positioning in relation to patriarchy), but because I interviewed both men and women, I also attend to the ways in which men’s gendered social locations become pertinent in understanding their memories about women’s sport.27 Because this project is issue oriented (i.e., coverage of women’s sports), the diversity among participants allowed me to attend to the relevance of social location without privileging social location as the primary factor in knowledge production. The contradictions and dissimilarities, the commonalities and overlaps in sports journalists’ stories reflect the many manifestations of patriarchal power structures and the many ways to resist and disrupt them.
Before I introduce the journalists whose voices drive this dissertation, I want to take a moment to note those whose voices this research lacks. The limitation of all oral history-based research, including this dissertation, is that it can only rely upon the accounts of those who still live. In my archival search and calls to Chicago newspapers, I learned that several of the journalists who dedicated their careers to bringing visibility to women’s sports died. Among these was Bill Jauss (Tribune), remembered as one of the prime figures not only in coverage of Title IX, but in Chicago sports in general. Missing from this dissertation is also Lacy Banks (Sun-Times), the first black sports journalists at that paper. He covered the Chicago Hustle, the professional woman’s basketball team extensively.

To my disappointment, I was also unable to interview any sports journalists who worked for the Chicago Defender, one of the nation’s most prominent black newspapers, at the time of important social change. Since 1905, the Defender has, according to historian Juliet Walker, historically “contributed to the development of a national black communal consciousness.” As such, I began my search for Defender journalists with an assumption that they would have provided an insight into how the paper viewed women’s sports within the context of Chicago’s black communities. Larry Gross, who served as sports editor for a long time passed in 2009. Others no longer worked at the Defender. The absence of bylines from the sports pages presented a challenge in identifying Defender sports journalists. Focusing on exclusively “white newspapers,” which according to historian Patrick Washburn provided limited and stereotypical portrayals of blacks in the United States, sports journalists from the Defender could have provided an insight into “everyday black life” in Chicago’s communities.
As I proceed, I must identify one glaring gap, namely that I fail to include any black voices into the conversation about coverage of women’s sport in Chicago. This omission results both from the factors outlined above, from patterns of segregation within journalism, and from my own limitations as a scholar. Although I do attend to issues of race and ethnicity at several points in the dissertation, my analysis of racial structures as manifest in the sports journalism industry and in women’s sport history is close to nonexistent. By almost exclusively centering white journalists (one journalist I talked to is an Asian-American man), this dissertation perpetuates the systematic exclusion of the struggles of people of color in journalism and in sport. I can only hope that future projects, including my own, can better integrate the black press, the ethnic press, and the voices of journalists of color into sports journalism scholarship.

Below, I introduce the journalists in alphabetical order per newspaper.

**Chicago Tribune**

Mike Conklin, 69, began working for the *Tribune* in 1969 in neighborhood news, and moved to the sports section in 1971. During his career, he wrote extensively about women’s sports, especially college sports. He also branched outside of the sports section to cover local recreational and community sports. Conklin continues to freelance for the *Tribune*, and he teaches sport journalism classes at DePaul University. He obtained his bachelor’s degree from Cornell College and his master’s degree from Loyola University.

Phil Hersh has served as the international/Olympic reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* since 1987, prior to which he worked for the *Chicago Daily News* and the
Chicago Sun-Times. He covered fifteen Olympic Games in his career and reported from some 50 countries. In his articles, he focuses on the relationship between sport, culture, and politics. Hersh continues to write about women’s sports for the Tribune, notably about soccer, lacrosse, and professional basketball. He obtained his bachelor’s degree from Yale University.

Jody Homer (now Temkin), 60, covered prep sports for the Suburban Tribune, the Chicago Tribune’s suburban inserts and, later, became the Illinois men’s basketball beat writer for the Chicago Tribune. In her women’s sports coverage, she wrote extensively about recreational leagues, youth sports, and marathons. Homer left sports journalism in the late 1980s, after which she continued to freelance. She obtained her bachelor’s degree from Washington University in St. Louis.

Linda Kay was born in Brooklyn, New York. Prior to joining the Chicago Tribune in 1978, she worked in Washington, D.C., for a political activist and for papers in New Jersey and San Diego. She took an investigative and a human interest approach to sports reporting. Kay wrote extensively about tennis, gymnastics, marathons, and she also covered several Olympic Games. Kay moved to Montreal in 1988 and currently teaches journalism at Concordia University. She obtained her bachelor’s degree from Syracuse University.

Marla Krause started her career at the Pioneer Press (Illinois) and, after a brief stint in Milwaukee, she joined the Chicago Tribune in 1978. At the Tribune she held a variety positions, primarily at the copy desk. She was in charge of the layout in several Tribune departments, including in the sports department where she served as sports news editor 1978 and 1985. Krause left the Tribune in the early 2000s and currently teaches in
the Department of Journalism at DePaul University. She obtained her bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois and her master’s degree from the University of Chicago.

Skip Myslenski, 69, joined the Chicago Tribune at the end of 1978 after several years at the Philadelphia Inquirer prior to which he freelanced. Due to his experiences with magazine-type writing and subsequent work at Sports Illustrated, Myslenski primarily wrote lengthy stories for the Chicago Tribune. He also co-wrote a five-day-a-week column with Linda Kay titled “Odds and Ins” for several years in the early 1980s. He covered women’s professional sports, men’s professional sports and the Olympics. He retired in 2008 and continues to write as a contributor to Northwestern University’s athletic communications site. He obtained a bachelor’s degree in English and master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

Bob Sakamoto began his journalism career at the Chicago Daily News. After the paper folded, he joined the Tribune Company in 1977, first as a sports writer for the Suburban Tribune. In the mid-1980s, he moved to the downtown bureau and began covering primarily men’s basketball for the Chicago Tribune. He also extensively covered women’s sports, particularly softball. After thirty-two years at the Tribune, Sakamoto joined the DePaul Department of Athletics in 2009, where he now serves as assistant director of athletics communications. He obtained a bachelor’s degree at MacMurray College and a master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

Susan Sternberg, 60, joined the Suburban Tribune as the first woman in the sports department. In her career, she specialized in the coverage of girls’ and women’s interscholastic sports. She left the Suburban Tribune in 1981 and has lived in Houston,
Texas, since then with her family. She obtained a bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois.

Owen Youngman, 61, worked at the *Chicago Tribune* for thirty-seven years focusing on technological innovation and product development. In the newsroom, among many of his positions, he served as deputy sports editor between 1974 and 1986. When the Tribune Co. purchased a printing plant and restructured the newspaper, Youngman oversaw the transition of *Suburban Tribune* personnel into the downtown bureau. Youngman is currently a professor and the Knight Chair in Digital Media Strategy at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. He obtained a bachelor’s degree from North Park University.

**Chicago Sun Times**

Taylor Bell, 74, covered high school sports for most of his life. After holding a job at several papers in Illinois, he landed at the *Chicago Sun-Times* and stayed there for thirty-three years until retirement. For most of his career, Bell served as high school sports editor, overseeing the *Sun-Times* girls’ and boys’ prep sports coverage. He obtained a bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois.

Steve Tucker joined the *Chicago Sun-Times* sports department in 1984 where, working for Bell, he covered high school sports, including football, swimming, basketball, and softball. He became primarily known for his extensive coverage and contributions to girls’ high school sports. Tucker serves on several committees for girls’
basketball awards, and he is a voting member of the Associated Press poll for women’s college basketball. He obtained a bachelor’s degree from the University of Iowa.

**Arlington Heights Daily Herald**

Bob Frisk, 78, began working for the *Arlington Heights Herald*, which later became the *Daily Herald*, in 1952 as a high school sophomore and served as sports editor at the paper for fifty years before retiring in 2008. Frisk has been recognized by the Illinois High School Association for his contributions to girls’ sports coverage. He is credited with establishing the Paddock Cup, a competition for both boys’ and girls’ for high school sports in the Chicago suburbs. Frisk graduated from the University of Illinois.

John Radtke, 57, began his sports writing career in 1975 at the *DeKalb Daily Chronicle*. Specializing in high school sports, Radtke worked for several papers, including the *Courier News* in Elgin, Illinois, prior to joining the *Daily Herald* in 1995. Covering girls’ sports and Title IX issues for most of his career, Radtke currently serves as the online prep-sports manager for the *Herald*. He attended Elgin Community College and Judson University.

Howard Schlossberg began his career at the *Pioneer Press*, which used to be owned by the *Sun-Times*, in Barrington, Illinois, covering high school sports before he joined the *Daily Herald*’s sports department as a stringer. Schlossberg currently teaches journalism at Columbia College in Chicago while he continues to write for the *Daily*
Herald. He obtained a bachelor’s degree from the University at Albany, SUNY and a master’s degree from Northern Illinois University.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Consistent with much of historical scholarship, I organize this dissertation chronologically, depending on when the journalists entered the industry. I interpreted the journalists’ stories inductively, whereby I attended to emerging patterns and themes in interview transcripts primarily, and newspaper articles secondarily. This approach allowed me to follow the stories of the journalists and attend to overlaps as well as diversions in memories about women’s sports coverage.

After I briefly introduce the literature that informed my research, I dedicate each of the following four chapters to historical “moment” or “event” that changed or should have changed women’s sports coverage in the 1970s and 1980s. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on journalists’ personal backgrounds and their entries into the sports journalism industry. I divided the men and the women into separate chapters, starting with the men, for several reasons. First, following chronological order, men provided the little coverage that women received prior to the 1970s and during the 1970s. According to the journalists, Chicago newspapers did not employ a woman in sports departments well into the 1970s. Second, I observed that journalists’ relationship to sport and to sports journalism is severely gendered. Because of their social location in relation to a male-dominated field, men and women experienced sports journalism careers differently. By separating their stories, I attend to the gendered social and cultural norms that shaped
journalists’ relationship to sport, to sports journalism, and to women’s sports coverage. In Chapter 3, I address men journalists’ exposure to women’s sports and their paths to sports journalism as a career. Since they all already worked in the industry when Congress passed Title IX, I also asked them about their memories of the legislation and its influence upon women’s sports and sports journalism. In Chapter 4, I focus on women’s relationship to sport, their position as the “first” women in a male-dominated sports newsroom, their attitudes toward covering women’s sports, and their relationships to feminism. The chapters, side by side, offer intriguing insights into the gendered elements of sports journalists experiences.

In Chapter 5, I take a closer look at the industry factors, including technological change, space, and audience interest. I focus on both structural elements and journalists’ agency. Specifically, I analyze how journalists who covered women’s sports negotiated industry factors and how they remembered the status of women’s sports coverage in relation to those structures. Interviews with decision-makers enabled me to attend to these dynamics, while interviews with writers offered an insight into how sports departments justified the inclusion/exclusion of women from sports pages. In this chapter, I also go beyond the sports pages to identify spaces that provided a particularly fruitful site of women’s sports coverage.

In Chapter 6, I shift the tone of analysis to a more critical interpretation of gendered discourses in relation to and in coverage of women’s sports. I position journalists’ memories of gender-related issues against the articles they wrote to detect the ways in which their attitudes, writings, and interpretations of writings produced and reproduced dominant ideologies about gender. I focus exclusively on the Chicago
Chapter 6 exposes how women participating in elite-level, college and professional, competition negotiated contemporary expectations of femininity with expectations of athleticism. I consider how journalists articulated ideas about gender and its intersections with sexuality, ethnicity/race, and nationality in their articles. As such, I position journalists’ memories against their own newspaper articles to consider how these accounts overlap and/or conflict. Allowing journalists to directly address the articles they wrote, this chapter makes a crucial link between journalistic norms, journalists’ attitudes (or memories) about women’s sports, and gendered representations. In the Conclusion, I offer an interpretation of patterns that emerged in interviews and discuss possibilities for further inquiries.

The contribution of this dissertation to scholarship in sport media and gender lies in that it goes beyond content analysis and gender ideologies in coverage to tap into sports journalists’ experiences at their respective newspapers and the changing Chicago newspaper market. Instead of relying upon dominant themes in coverage, I place the emphasis on those elements that sports journalists identified as important in their own work as well as in the work of their newspapers. In bringing visibility to sports journalists’ memories, this research offers a personal, human account of how sports journalists responded to women’s sports. As I illustrate in this dissertation, journalists brought their unique backgrounds and circumstances into their work as sports journalists and into coverage of women’s sports. Additionally, cultural factors, suburbanization, and
industry changes structures shaped the way sports journalists saw their roles in relation to covering women’s sports. All that is to say, journalists, newspapers, and industry norms matter in the assessment of coverage of women’s sports.

This dissertation highlights the many elements of sports journalists’ lives (i.e., the relationships, the insecurities, the emotions) that shaped their journalistic work during a time period of change in women’s sport and in coverage of women’s sport. Considering the continuing and perpetual marginalization of women in sports media coverage, the long-term efficacy of sports journalists’ gender-based efforts remains questionable. But at the very least, their memories open up a possibility to hope; hope that, even amidst systematic oppression, incremental actions can move the agenda of gender justice forward.

As I listened to sports journalists’ stories and read their articles, I found myself—by default—focusing upon the very problematic ways in which they remembered and wrote about women’s sports. As a feminist sports media scholar, I detected the issues well known to my colleagues who study sport and sports media. As a former female athlete who experienced the detrimental consequences of the ways in which sport media construct ideas about gender, I struggled to listen and to relate. I wondered, if these sports journalists claimed to be advocates of women’s sports, which nearly all of them did, why didn’t they do more?

But during this process, I also remembered the reason why I began this inquiry in the first place. A few years ago, I became aware of an article in the Chicago Tribune published on October 11, 1978, exactly six years before I was born. Mike Conklin, Tribune’s sports reporter, wrote the story titled “Unsung Athletes: 10 Who Are Tops”
about the ten female athletes in Chicago who, according to Conklin, did not receive the recognition they deserved. If that story appeared, I thought, then there must have been more stories like that. I wanted to learn more about these athletes as well as about the journalists who went outside of dominant gender ideologies to write about them. I wanted to go beyond words such as underrepresentation, trivialization, and misrepresentation, and bring visibility to the type of coverage that I, as a feminist scholar and former athlete, would like to see prosper in the future.

My struggle between privileging sports journalists’ voices and critiquing gender-based oppression may not be apparent in the writing, but it permeated all stages of the research. Ultimately, I decided to step back and refrain from scrutinizing many of the assertions that could have been, and perhaps should have been, problematized. I did so in order to demonstrate sensitivity both toward the historical context and toward the journalists who opened up to me for the purposes of this project. Critiques of their voices need to happen, but that may be another project. As I pursue feminist inquiries toward gender justice in the future, I do hope to become better at detecting the good work in sports journalism, however minimal that work may be. This work, this coverage, these stories must not get lost in the narratives about “lack” for they are integral further developing strategies for change.

Notes

1 Paul Logan, “Will Sports Ever Replace a Barbie Boll,” *The Arlington Heights Daily Herald*, October, 24, 1974, section 2, 1. Logan hoped that Mia would take advantage of having “a choice that girls never had years ago.” Logan covered girls’ sports for the Daily Herald from the late 1960s until the late 1970s. For more on legislative changes and interscholastic athletics, see chapters 1 and 3, for more on Billie Jean King and professional sports, see chapter 4, for more on Olga Korbut and the Olympics, see chapter 5.


For an overview of this literature, see the “Women’s Sports and Media Coverage: Historical Patterns” section in the Literature Review.


See also, Bennett, “Human Values in Oral History.”


24 Ryan, “‘I Didn’t Do Anything Important.’”


27 For a theoretical background on men’s gender-conscious positioning, see Linn Egebørg Holmgren and Jeff Hearn, “Framing ‘Men in Feminism’: Theoretical Locations, Local Contexts and Practical Passing in Men’s Gender-Conscious Positioning on Gender Equality and Feminism,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 2009): 403-418. See also, Michael A.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

To understand why the social and cultural changes of the 1970s so drastically impacted gender relations in sport, it is essential to consider the historical exclusion of women from sport. In the US culture, sport has historically been a male preserve. Attributing the origins of US sport to the process of European immigration, historian Roberta Park says, “On both sides of the Atlantic, nineteenth-century sport came to be forcefully and graphically depicted as the ‘natural’ province for males; hence, sport contributed substantially to establishing and maintaining ideologies about the proper sphere of women.” That sphere, most often, was situated outside of sport or within rigidly constrained boundaries of movement and activity. Tracking the history of women’s participation in sport, Park says that “whereas athletic sports for males became a very public affair … athletic sports for middle-class American females remained substantially, but not exclusively, a cloistered affair until the 1970s.” The process of tearing down “one of the few remaining male bastions in twentieth-century America,” thus, is that much more significant in light of this history.¹

But the social changes did not result in complete transformation of gender relations. Writing about the 1990s and the 2000s, scholars observe that men’s sports continued to occupy the center of sport. Sport sociologist Michael Messner argues sport is “a space that is actively constructed by and for men.” For men, sport have served an integral role in socialization and identity development. Author Varda Burstyn argues that
“success in sport is the most powerful social configuration of masculinity that any male can attain in our culture.” Sports media do not only represent sport’s role in society, but act in synergy with corporate sponsors, governing bodies, and political institutions to construct cultural meanings. Because most people experience sport in its mediated form, sports media do not merely provide a window into social relations, but, through ideological meanings embedded in media text, play a key role in social and identity formation. Simply put, men have historically understood themselves and their roles in society through participation and/or consumption of sport.²

Rather than providing a space for physical empowerment and liberation, sport tends to maintain its rigidly defined gender divisions even in times of wider social change. Historian Susan Cahn argues, concluding her comprehensive account of women’s sport history in Coming on Strong, that during social transformations sport did not lead the way; instead, differences and dichotomies only hardened. Sport, thus, “remains a cultural location for male dominance, a site where traditional patriarchal values are upheld and transformed in response to changes in the broader society.” These patterns prevailed throughout the 20th century. As Mary Jo Festle contends in Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women’s Sports, female athletes have historically been “discouraged, ridiculed, discriminated against, and ignored.” Thus, even with all the changes, sport systematically and persistently excluded and continues to exclude women.³
Women’s Sports: Historical Context

In the United States, women have been playing sports at least since the 1850s, but the 1960s led to an unprecedented change both in participation numbers and in philosophy around women in sport.\(^4\) The women’s movement and the civil rights movement spurred legal, political, and cultural changes, which seeped into the sports arena as well. The 1970s saw several federal civil rights initiatives that would enhance the status of women in sport. Most notably, Congress passed Title IX, an education amendment that prohibited discrimination based on sex at federally funded educational institutions. The law’s implementation moved slowly but caused immediate turmoil among athletic administrators many of whom did not object that schools blatantly excluded women from athletics. Although male leaders and coaches of men’s teams expressed reluctance or outright hostility toward efforts to better integrate women into interscholastic sport, participation numbers in the 1970s exponentially increased. Change occurred outside of the academic setting as well. Pushing for equal pay, endorsements, and social acceptance, professional athletes gained the spotlight and challenged well-established norms about gender and athleticism, thereby aiding women’s progress.\(^5\)

Scholarship in sports situates Title IX as a beginning of a new era that has led to tremendous transformations in girls and women’s sports. Understandably so. Before Title IX, opportunities for competition before Title IX were scarce. In 1965, the Division for Girls’ and Women’s Sports (DGWS) established the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) to sponsor and sanction college athletics for women. The CIAW held the first tournament in 1969 and by 1972 sponsored national championships
in badminton, basketball, golf, gymnastics, tennis, track and field, and swimming and diving. Since 1972, when Congress passed Title IX, girls’ and women’s interscholastic sports saw a tremendous boost. In 1970, two years prior to Title IX, fewer than 300,000 girls participated in high school sports while colleges sponsored on average 2.5 women’s teams per school. Title IX implementation encountered legislative and institutional hurdles. But even with those hurdles, by 1988, only ten years after the mandatory compliance date, girls’ participation in high school increased to close to 2 million, while the average number of women’s teams in intercollegiate athletics increased to 7.31. Even though US government initiatives and physical educators promoted girls’ and women’s participation in sport in the 1950s and 1960s for the purposes of enhancing, as sport historian Jaime Schultz wrote, “their own health, the health of the economy, and the health of the nation,” the 1970s and Title IX live in historical records as a turning point for women in sports. The use of Title IX as a platform for advancing gender equity in athletics was, in many ways, an outcome of earlier feminist political activism, combined with shifts in attitudes toward gender. Enforcement debates around Title IX and the expansion of girls’ and women’s opportunities in interscholastic sports spurred ideological battles around women’s roles in the society, around sex-based differences, and around the relationship between gender and athleticism. Feminist advocacy groups, women’s sport administrators, coaches, and parents joined in pressuring institutions to implement Title IX-related equity measures by sponsoring more teams for girls and women, and providing resources. To that, athletic directors (mostly men) and stakeholders in men’s sports (including the NCAA) resisted the changes: Their arguments ranged from outright
hostility to women in sport to merely confused about the law’s implications upon boys’ and men’s sports. Even during the first decade after the implementation, amidst the enforcement debates, social and cultural forces propelled the inclusion of girls and women in sport and the change in gender norms.8

One source of motivation behind the advancement of girls and women in sport derived from the United States’ goal to enhance the country’s international prestige through sport. Sport historian Jaime Schultz argues, “If the United States was to assert its politico-athletic dominance on an international stage, it could no longer afford to repress women’s sport.” Schultz adds, however, that the changes that began in the 1950s and the 1960s amounted to both an “unprecedented growth of women’s sports” and “a number of negative unintended consequences.” Divisions emerged between predominantly white colleges and historically black colleges, and between physical educators and athletic leaders. Eventually subsumed in the NCAA’s male model of intercollegiate sports, participation for women expanded overall and girls and women began to adhere to a more specialized model of sport. This organizational structure led to less inclusive sporting environments and to the decline in historically black colleges’ sporting success. The changes did result in a tremendous expansion of competitive opportunities and an increased success of women in international competition, but only within the boundaries of socially acceptable standards of femininity. As scholar Betty Spears lamented in 1978, “Neither approved championships nor federal laws, nor national Olympic teams can assure society’s acceptance of women’s sport.” Despite changes in US society, women made selective progress and continued to face resistance in relation to sport participation.9
That said, between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, scholars observed a change in social perceptions about women in sport. In 1965, Eleanor Metheny published *Connotations of Movement in Sport and Dance*, which assesses meaning, symbols, and dimensions of human movement. Metheny’s collection of speeches and articles explores the historical roots of mythologies and outlines dominant ideas of what constituted as “appropriate” type of sport competition for women. The “socially sanctioned image of feminine sports competition” dictated that women ought not to engage in activities that require bodily contact or force or long distances. These conventions justified the exclusion of women, for instance, from handball and from marathon running. Women may, however, be socially permitted to engage in activities that allow the body to move in “aesthetically pleasing patterns” and where “a special barrier prevents bodily contact with the opponent in face-to-face forms of competition.” Gymnastics, for its aesthetic qualities and volleyball, for the net separating the athletes, met these criteria. Social sanctions, Metheny argued, derived more so from cultural than biological factors, which served to “determine the masculine image of behaviors appropriate to males and the corresponding feminine image of behaviors appropriate to females in each social group.” In sport, these factors justified the continued relegation of women to subordinate roles.10

Within 15 years, these perceptions began to shift. In the preface of the edited collection *Women and Sport: From Myth to Reality*, published in 1978, Carole Oglesby said, “We have lived in a world where sport is symbolized and verbalized as a male domain … But that world is changing. Feminism is changing the face of the world around us. Women, through asserting their rights within the sport environment, are strengthening and speeding the impact of feminism in our society.” Many of the mythologies prevailed
the authors of the book conclude, but as Betty Spears writes, “[US] society appears to be moving … toward an acceptance of a broadening spectrum of lifestyles, including approval of physical prowess of women, and toward a climate of civil and social rights enforced through legislation.” The women’s movement, the civil rights movement and Title IX collectively contributed to this shift.\textsuperscript{11}

As I illustrate in the next section, women’s sport coverage did not catch up with the boom in participation, nor did it follow the legislative, social and cultural transformations that secured a place for women in US sport. When media outlets attended to these transformations, the articles endorsed not women’s sports advocates’ perspectives but the attitudes of those who vehemently opposed women’s participation. Enforcement debates around Title IX, in particular, led to misperceptions about the purpose of the law and perpetuated harmful myths. The most pertinent of those myths claimed that the increase in women’s sports teams and the dedication of resources to women’s participation hurt men’s sports. Further, advancements of women in sport encountered a backlash in the 1980s when conservative politics curtailed the reach of Title IX and promoted attitudes that positioned women’s sport as a threat to masculinity, a threat to the country’s well-being. Thus, media coverage did even more harm than merely excluding women: It reproduced harmful attitudes about gender and outright attacked women for participating in sport.\textsuperscript{12}
Women’s Sports Coverage: Gender Ideologies

Sport scholars consider Title IX as a turning point in the history of women’s sport and as such anticipated that coverage of women’s sport would subsequently change. Although few empirical studies document pre-Title IX coverage, selective accounts paint the picture about the female athlete image. At various points in the 20th century, coaches and advocates of women’s sports did make various efforts to battle the exclusion of women from sports coverage. For instance, the United States Field Hockey Association’s staff began publishing a magazine titled *The Sportswoman* in 1924. The magazine provided information about women’s sports and female athletes, offered instruction to the readers on how to play a particular sport, and promoted tournaments and other sporting events. Heavily focusing on field hockey, one of the few acceptable sports for women at the time, the magazine according to physical educator Lynn Couturier served to “capture broader social tensions over gender relations and class values,” “challenge male hegemony” and “empower readers.” In a similar venture, Billie Jean King started *womenSports*, which intended to promote athletes and celebrate women’s athleticism. These initiatives, however, did not last long and certainly did not leave a permanent mark on the nation’s consciousness.13

By and large, media completely ignored the existence of women’s sports. In the late 1970s, Gaye Tuchman observed that mainstream media “symbolically annihilated” women, in other words underrepresented and trivialized women as a social group. This observation, even after Title IX’s implementation, applied to the media’s treatment of female athletes. Referring to the 1970s, communication scholar Jennings Bryant
classified coverage of women’s sports as “zero,” “disastrous,” and “sexist,” summing it up as “at best anachronistic and at worst antagonistic.” Further elaborating on this point, Bryant added “the society that has been impacted by Title IX in school and college athletic programs does not appear to have been touched by the paper news media.” Others came to the conclusion that even media outlets paid attention to female athletes, coverage reflected problematic assumptions about women. In an assessment of “media coverage of the female athlete before, during, and after Title IX,” sport sociologist Mary Jo Kane found that the number of articles in one publication significantly increased between 1964-1987, but these representations relegated women into sex-appropriate roles that would not challenge traditional gender norms. In her conclusion, Kane would agree with Bryant in answering the question of whether media coverage underwent “fundamental” change. Kane writes, “15 years after Title IX, female participation in athletics remains heavily influenced by traditional beliefs about what is considered appropriate, ladylike behavior.” These articles suggest that Title IX may have been a turning point for women’s participation in sport, but it did not lead to dramatic transformation in media coverage.14

The media, at times, did endorse female athletes’ progress, but these instances hardly shifted larger patterns of exclusion. For example, in the 1970s, historian Susan Cahn writes that *Sports Illustrated* and *Time* dedicated articles on “sexism and sport that acknowledged the pressing need for change by presenting an unambiguously feminist indictment of the male-dominated sports world.” These articles showed an empowering image of women and their participation in sport. However, Cahn argues that “except for the hoopla surrounding single events,” such as for instances the famous match between
Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs in 1974, “the media continued to neglect women’s sports.” Despite the advances, women’s sports coverage remained slim. Title IX and other historical events in women’s sport did not seem to drastically impact the values and priorities in the sports journalism industry. 15

The 1980s saw a shift in representation of female athletes. Finally noticing that women did participate in sport, the media began to showcase women but with notable problems. In 1988, sport sociologists Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Cynthia Hasbrook argued that representations provided “conflicting messages about female athletes.” Calling this type of representation “ambivalence,” Duncan and Hasbrook said “positive portrayals of sportswomen are combined with subtly negative suggestions that trivialize or undercut the women’s efforts.” In other words, media outlets began to recognize women’s athletic accomplishments in sport, but they portrayed them in ways that would dismiss female athletes’ competence. Media coverage constructed differences based on gender and evoked stereotypes around womanhood and athleticism. Providing extensive commentary on female athletes’ appearance, clothing, behavior and social roles, sport media promoted an idealized femininity and simultaneously erased athletes who deviated from the norm. 16

In the 1980s, sports coverage greatly contributed to the construction of “sexual difference.” This term has primarily been used to describe photographic representations whereby the coverage encompasses “stereotypes of women and men, attitudes relating the appropriate roles and behaviors of females and males, attitudes toward appropriate appearance and dress of women, and so on.” Representations of women as weak, physically inferior to men, and submissive were prevalent and, according to some,
became even worse with time. Weak and sexualized, female athletes began to appear in photos that resemble soft-pornography more closely than sports coverage. Other studies suggested that coverage was moving away from trivialization and sexualization, but that female athletes remained under pressure to appear in gender-appropriate ways.17

The positioning of athletes in gender-appropriate sports is referred to as “containment” according to which men are represented in traditionally masculine sports, while women are relegated to traditionally feminine sports. A problem arises when athletes (male and female) compete in sports that do not “match” social expectations of gender and disrupt gender norms. To compensate for deviance, female athletes who do not conform to standards of heterosexual femininity through their sport appear in supporting roles, as wives or girlfriends, or as sexual objects. Thereby, media coverage constructs a “false reality in which women are viewed only as feminine sex symbols rather than powerful, talented athletes.” Such coverage only undermines women’s athletic competence. This type of coverage was typical in the 1980s and, all evidence suggests, has been alive and well in sports media ever since.18

Because women’s athleticism represented an inherent contradiction to sport’s association with masculinity, female athletes challenged contemporary gender norms. These tensions appeared in media coverage during the 1970s and 1980s. Sport sociologist Michael Messner argues that during the 1970s and 1980s female athletes became a “contested ideological terrain” upon which social constructions of femininity clashed with those of athleticism. Media representations of female athletes, thus, became embedded with this tension, ultimately asking, “Can a woman be strong, aggressive, competitive, and still be considered feminine?” The answer, as a plethora of studies
conclude, was yes, but only within certain boundaries. Female athletes received coverage only if they displayed traits of, what RW Connell and James Messerschmidt refer to as “emphasized femininity,” a type of gender performance that embraced athletic competence only if neatly packaged within (hetero)sexual attractiveness. As Messner profoundly puts it, “The social meanings surrounding the physiological differences between the sexes in the male-defined institution of organized sports and the framing of the female athlete by the sports media threaten to subvert any counter-hegemonic potential posed by women athletes.” When women fought for equality in sport, sports media strategically held them back.¹⁹

Beyond ideologies, practical elements reveal sexism. Summarizing studies on women’s sports coverage in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Boutilier and SanGiovanni note that when women appear on the sports pages, their stories are on the last few pages of the sports section. “There,” they explain, “in one or two paragraphs, one finds only the absolutely minimal information on the athletic event—no development, no analysis, no slices of detail to flesh out the final score.” Except for a few major national and international events and except when competing in socially acceptable sports, women’s sports coverage was nonexistent. The very few articles reflected stereotypical notions about gender.²⁰

The brief synthesis of literature above provides an insight into the character of women’s sports coverage in the 1970s and 1980s. Collectively, these studies tell one straightforward story: Despite the dramatic institutional, social, and cultural transformations in gender relations in sport, women did not have their watershed moment in sports media. In 1989, concluding a comprehensive review of scholarship about
coverage of women’s sports in the post-Title IX period, sport sociologist Mary Jo Kane concludes, “Female athletic participation continues to be underrepresented and trivialized in the media and part of this trivialization is to treat sportswomen as traditionally stereotyped ‘feminized’ women rather than serious athletic competitors.” The exclusion and stereotyping of women in sport media suggested that female athletes did not gain widespread acceptance in US society.21

The literature review above points to some changes and ideological shifts in coverage, but it does not explain why sport media outlets continued to dismiss women and their athleticism. To better understand the mechanisms and processes behind this coverage, scholars took a deeper look into sports newsrooms’ demographic composition and into the news values that drive coverage. I introduce that literature below.

Women in Sports Journalism

To explain gender ideologies in coverage, scholars began asking questions about the production of sports news. These studies ask two main questions. Who is in charge of news production and what journalistic values drive coverage? One approach to find an answer was to examine the place of women in sports journalism.

Even though the history of sports journalism, just as the history of sport, tends to focus on men, a number of journalism historians—some of who would identify as feminist, some not—have taken up the task to incorporate women into the histories either by documenting their writings, or if possible, preserving their accounts through oral histories. Most notable of these collections are Marion Marzolf’s *Up from the Footnote:*
*A History of Women Journalists*, Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons’ collection *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism*, and Patricia Bradley’s *Women and the Press: The Struggle for Equality*. This literature documents the gender-related and inequities women experienced in the journalism profession and highlights how news values and decision making processes systemically excluded women. A female journalist was often “alone in a field dominated by men.” Not only were press clubs and official social gatherings closed off for women, but according to Bradley, “male-only journalist organizations reified working-class bonding rituals—backslapping and drinking and sharing a common cynicism,” which also entailed “not associating with the weakest link, women who had no power to offer.” But as a result of the women’s movement, which developed in the 1960s, with legal protection behind their backs, women began to fight against wage- and workplace-discrimination, with some progress and mixed results. Reflecting upon the changes, Marzolf wrote in 1977, “The early 1970’s were years of awareness, action and frustration, much talk and some accomplishment for professional newswomen.” These struggles carried into the last few decades of the 20th century.22

Women gained access to sports reporting during World War II, but lost their jobs once the men returned to the country. After a couple of decades of stagnation, the 1970s mobilized another wave of hiring women into sports newsrooms. Media scholar Pamela Creedon notes that “because of federal equal opportunity employment mandates issued in the early 1970s, doors were ‘magically’ opening for women in sports reporting.” Creedon’s historical overview of women in sports journalism suggests that not all doors opened for women. During this time, sports news began to shift from game reports and
statistics to include quotes from coaches and players, which required that sports reporters conduct post-game interviews. But many did not welcome women into this male-only space. For instance, in 1978 *Sports Illustrated*’s parent company, Time Inc., sued the New York Yankees (among others) for prohibiting sports reporter Melissa Ludtke’s entrance into the locker room. Although the federal district court judge ruled that “all reporters, regardless of sex, should have equal access to the locker room,” teams continued to throw women out of the locker rooms and the players sexually harassed women in the locker rooms. Women’s entrance into sports journalism, thus, exposed the industry’s deeply engrained hostilities against women. To respond to these gender-related barriers, women established an organization called Association for Women in Sports Media in the late 1980s to nurture a pipeline for women entering sports journalism. The organization, led by some of the pioneer women who are credited with breaking gender barriers, remains active and engages in supporting women in the profession.\(^23\)

That said, gender-based barriers did not miraculously go away. In fact, the treatment of women journalists reflects the same systems of oppression that undervalue women’s participation in sport and render female athletes invisible. Feminist scholars have pointed out, “Sports news is home to one of the most intense and most historically enduring gender divisions in journalism, in terms of who is permitted to cover which sports as journalist, how athletes are covered as well as in terms of which genders are served as audiences.” Even though the gap between men and women closed in other sectors of journalism, women have not reached a critical mass in sports departments. Sports directors/managers/editors have overwhelmingly been white men and that
The demographic composition has hardly changed in the last few decades. The lack of gender (and racial) diversity in sports newsrooms has corresponded with the underrepresentation of women’s sports in coverage.24

In light of women’s widespread—though capped—entrance into the sports journalism industry in the 1970s, feminist sports media scholars subsequently asked about the relationship between presence of women journalists and (amount of and quality of) coverage of women’s sports. Although this scholarship describes gender relations in the 2000s, it offers useful theoretical frameworks for interpreting patterns in the 1970s and 1980s. Advocates hoped that having more women in sports newsrooms would overturn masculinist news values and challenge gender hierarchies. But sports media scholars Marie Hardin and Stacie Shain question the efficacy of such approach, pointing out that “the most problematic assumption [of liberal feminism] is that women who work in media institutions will become immune to the hegemonic, ‘commonsense’ gender relations that permeate and govern media environments.” Although women may be better situated to detect gender-based oppression due to their social identity, feminist scholars overwhelmingly assert that may not be willing or may not have the institutional power to defy sexist practices. In fact, as media scholar Judith Cramer illustrates, some women who began working in the sports journalism industry in the 1980s did not want to cover, let alone advocate for, women’s sports. A closer look at institutional structures and values explains this disconnect.25

Female professionals who seek a career in sports media face both masculine norms of journalism and masculine norms of sport. The intersection of journalism with sports, yet another institution governed by standards of hypermasculinity, creates an
environment where gendered hierarchies, following the “authoritarian power structure” of sports, are even more pronounced than they are in other sectors of the newsroom. The gendered socialization processes in sports newsrooms carry serious implications in terms of beat assignment, nature of coverage, and intended target audience. Because of the intersection with the sports industry, female sports media professionals face intense pressure to negotiate their—seemingly—contradicting identities of a woman with that of a sport journalist. Gender norms that lead to the scrutiny of women in sports media are historically engrained and, based upon the draught of female sports media professionals, enduring.

The most visible marker of gender disparity in the sports media industry is signified by the vast underrepresentation of women. The low percentage of women in sports newsrooms would classify them as “tokens.” The concept of tokenism was coined by Rosabeth Moss Kanter in the 1970s to refer to the status of women in industries where most of the employees are men. As members of the minority group, women become “representatives of their category rather than independent individuals.” Sports media scholars observed that “women who work in sports departments can be understood as tokens because they fail to meet the 15 percent threshold.” Women reported that they often worked harder in order to overcome the perception that women did not belong in sports newsrooms. A female sports media professional reported in one study that “getting through the actual barrier and getting people to believe that you know what you are talking about can be hard sometimes as a woman.” The predominant presence of men in the sports media industry contributes to the culture that considers men as sources of
authority on sports. Because of the pressure to overcome gender stereotypes, women often adapt to an “ideal worker norm” to prove themselves.28

Newsrooms have historically determined who is allowed to cover which sports, and these divisions have been drawn along gendered lines. In the first half of the 20th century, women almost exclusive covered the “four Fs”—food, furnishing, fashion and family. Certainly, sports journalism falls outside of the four Fs, and thus it is men who defined what was and is important for the sports pages. As Kay Mills noted in 1988, “Sports are the American ritual, far more so than politics. The long exclusion of women from covering all aspects of that ritual denied them not only their legitimate interest in sports but also their opportunity to report on a key aspect of American life equally with male reporters.” Thus, in adherence to journalistic norms, women—with notable exceptions—have been excluded from covering sports.29

Gendered assignments are common in newsrooms, where women may be asked to cover a “women’s agenda.” In sports, confining women to covering women’s sports has serious implications: “the secondary status of women’s sports results in secondary status of those who report on them—invariably women.”30 For women to realistically advance, they would have to move out of covering the “low-rung beat assignment,” or in other words, cover high-profile men’s sports. A number of studies suggested that assumptions about gender do not only carry implications in terms of how assignments are divided, but also which sports are covered. Attitudes toward women’s sports are ambivalent at best. If staffers in decision-making positions (e.g., editors) believe that readers are not interested in women’s sports and that female athletes are “naturally less athletic,” then it subsequently follows that women who cover women will be relegated to a secondary
status. Additionally, previous research has found that (white) male reporters are viewed as more knowledgeable on sports, while women were only viewed favorably if they covered women’s sports.

Although historically women have covered men’s sports, and have done so successfully, female sports journalists report that they are often pigeonholed into low-profile assignments. This is similar to general newsroom practices that relegate women to covering “women’s agenda.” In sports, the women’s agenda is assumed to be women’s sports. Gendered distribution of assignments is problematic for several reasons. First, such practices reinforce the assumption that women are not knowledgeable about men’s sports and therefore not capable of writing those stories. Second, because of the disrespect toward women’s sports in the newsroom, those covering women’s sports struggle to advance in their careers. Thus, journalists—whether men or women—who are assigned to cover women’s sports are perceived as less prestigious than journalists who write about high-profile men’s sports.

Overall, women’s entrance into the sports journalism industry has been far from widespread and far from smooth. When sports departments began a wave of hiring women in the 1970s, women encountered resistance. Since then women have had to negotiate their gender identity with pre-existing masculinist norms. While some women have sued their papers and advocated for women’s status in journalism and for women’s sports, researchers find that female journalists may not want to be perceived as “feminist” or as “crusaders (i.e., troublemakers)” at their job. Their presence in the newsroom, thus, does not automatically result in a disruption of male-as-norm assumptions that guide sports production and coverage.
Gendered Journalistic Values and Industry Norms

Research on gender in sports journalism is fairly recent comparing to other areas of study. Although histories of sports journalism and contemporary assessments of the industry offer an insight into major trends, up until the 1990s few studies discussed explicitly how gendered values and norms shaped coverage. This gap, sports media scholar Pamela Creedon speculates results from several factors. Research on women and on gender issues (which emerged in the 1970s) tends to ignore sports journalism. Additionally, Creedon observed that up until the 1990s “the field of sports reporting generally has not received much attention by mass communication scholars” because of the “stigma” that sports news carry less importance than other types of news. In fact, sports media scholar Mark Douglas Lowes observed in his ethnographic work the widespread perception that “the sports section of the daily newspaper, much like the entertainment or society pages, exists apart from ‘real’ or ‘hard’ news as a source of escape and pleasure.” However, sports media scholar David Rowe said that this not absolve sports journalism from critical interrogation. In fact, Rowe embraces “sports journalism’s engagement with sport as popular culture.” By doing so calls for a deeper scrutiny of social divisions, political detachments and professional norms. Although recent scholarship, which I introduce below, assesses gendered practices and their implications, this literature offers a limited understanding of gender relations in 1970s and 1980s sports departments. In light of this gap, historical analyses of gender norms and values in sports journalism become that much more important.
Scholarship that tracks historical changes in the sports journalism industry provides a useful starting point for understanding journalistic processes in relation to sport. For instance, Robert McChesney’s historical overview “Media Made Sport” provides a thorough insight into the “symbiotic relationship” between sport and mass media in US society. Since the wave of industrialization, which swept through the United States in the 1830 and the 1840, gave rise to the newspaper industry. Although sport did not play a prominent role in the papers yet, throughout the 19th century newspapers became integral to the promotion of sport and of ideals about manhood. By the 1920s and 1930s, sport claimed its own section in the newspaper. During this time, McChesney writes, “Newspapers across the country became active in promotion participant and spectator sport activities in their communities.” Radio further popularized sport in the US society, while the emergence of television has significantly shifted the relationship between sport and mass media toward a highly commercialized model. With these changes, McChesney concludes by saying, “Sport[s] has risen to staggering and unprecedented levels of importance in American society in the 1980s.” Although McChesney does not track the history of women’s sports coverage, it is clear that the “sport-media boom” deliberately prioritized around men’s sports. Throughout history, mass media turned sport into a “cultural edifice,” one that focused on men to entertain male audiences.36

Sports journalism has historically served a promotional purpose, whereby newspapers and radio have engaged in fan-driven coverage of athletes, teams and leagues. But in the process of attempted professionalization and endorsement of a code of ethics, sports journalists began to move away from those roots. In order to distance
themselves from the “bastard stepchild of the profession” stereotype, sports journalists and newly established professional organizations, such as notably the Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE), set ethical guidelines, embracing the importance of objectivity in the 1970s. These guidelines position objectivity as an “ethically neutral” standard; however, feminist scholars have argued that dominant news ideology, such as objectivity, actually privileges some groups’ voices over others’. Mass communication historians Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons argue that objectivity “pretends to be gender-neutral but actually is based on principles of male-dominated political-economic system: competition, achievement, independence, rationality and logic.” Objectivity urges journalists to remove themselves and their own interest in the subject, thereby ensuring that they do not become advocates for a particular cause or subject.  

When women’s sports began to emerge, sports journalists tightly held on to the standards of objectivity, claiming that to cover women’s sports would be engaging in “promotional journalism.” Promotional journalism thereby came to carry negative connotations in relation to women’s sports, when in fact the very foundation of US journalism was built on the idea that sports coverage should be promotional and guided coverage of men’s sports for more than a century. Under the guise of objectivity, women’s sports have systemically been erased from coverage (as discussed later) and female reporters, who are most likely to be assigned to cover women’s sports, have deterred from advocacy fearing that they may appear unprofessional.

Sports journalism equates competency with traditional journalistic norms and values, and views women’s sports as less valuable than men’s sports. When asked to explain the lack of women’s sports coverage, sports journalists cite a wide variety of
reasons—all of which appear gender-neutral yet perpetuate the exclusion of women from the sports pages. For instance, sports journalists often claim that cannot just simply cover women’s sport—that women need to achieve noteworthy results to deserve coverage. This standard relates to objectivity insofar as men’s sports are considered objectively interesting, while women’s sports need to stand out to become interesting. This standard results in selective representation of female athletes, and only in the case of top performances and a simultaneous regular coverage of men’s sports even if the teams do not achieve any notable results.39

Sports journalist and decision-makers often cite audience interest as a reason for the lack of women’s sports coverage. Sports editors justify their newspaper’s overemphasis on men’s sports by claiming that their audiences demand that type of coverage, leaving no room for women’s sports. However, feminist scholars have rebutted this claim, arguing that sports editors in fact have very little understanding of their readers. In a national survey with newspaper sports editors, Marie Hardin finds that only about half of them use research to find out information about their readers and even fewer actually know from that data what readers expect in coverage. Hardin, therefore, concludes that “claims that sports editors make decisions based on knowledge of readers seem to be embedded more in myth than in reality.” This rationale, similar to others, is constrained by the narrow vision driven by male-as-norm standards.40 Sports journalists’ assumptions about female athletes can impact both the extent to which they cover women’s sports and how they cover women’s sports. Sports journalists (especially men) tend to believe that women are less athletic than men. Sports journalists who may have limited exposure to elite-level female athletes tend to hold harmful assumptions about the
quality of women’s competitions. These assumptions are particularly problematic when sports journalists essentialize women’s competence, ignoring social and historical factors that have constrained women’s elite-level opportunities. If sports journalists believe that women are naturally less athletic and therefore less worthy of coverage, then it can be expected that these attitudes will filter into the little coverage newspapers do dedicate to women’s sports. As the section below indicates, gender ideologies in women’s sports coverage often dismiss women’s athletic competence. In sum, journalistic values and norms carry significant implications for women’s sports coverage.41

Building upon the literature above, I position sports journalists’ voices against currents in feminist sports media scholarship to examine how their accounts relate to the well-established problems in sports journalism and in sports coverage. Even though gender relations in sport shifted in the 1970s and 1980s, women’s representations in sport media constructed a different reality.

Notes

4 From the 1880s on, educational institutions, community programs and clubs regularly included sporting activities for women. Women’s participation spurred up sporadically during World War II, when the men went away to war, and in the 1960s, when intercollegiate athletic opportunities arose. Jaime Schultz challenged the historical accounts by positioning cultural, rather than political, shifts as moments of change in women’s sport. See, Festle, Playing Nice. Cahn, Coming on Strong. Jaime Schultz, Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women’s Sport History (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2014).
5 See Carole Oglesby, Women and Sport: From Myth to Reality (Publisher?).


For a history of Title IX lawsuits in the context of sport and the cultural meanings thereof see Suggs, A Place on the Team. Sarah K. Fields, Female Gladiators: Gender, Law, and Contact Sport in America. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

The timing of Title IX could not have been better. Amidst feminist activism, the 1970s brought about a cultural shift around gender roles in the United States. The activists behind Title IX did not intend for it to be a sports law. According to historian Amanda Edwards “athletics became a central issue among the institutions of government . . . because athletics arose as the primary source of contention among those groups directly affected by Title IX policy and by the institutional policy-making processes occurring at the time.” In other words, individuals --- particularly men--- in positions of legal enforcement recognized that Title IX might threaten male domination in sports. Title IX amended the end of discrimination based on gender in educational institutions, but beyond that the law also led to a contestation of gendered power relations in a space where boys learn how to become men while girls and women remain on the margins.


At the time, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governed men’s athletics programs, while the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) governed women’s sports. The two organizations engaged in battles over the governance of women’s sports years before Title IX came into effect. In 1974, however, when athletic organizations, the NCAA and male athletic administrators in particular realized that the Title IX applied to athletics, they were alarmed. The NCAA leadership claimed that Title IX activists, including the AIAW, were out to get men’s sports. NCAA President John Fuzak told the Tribune that he worried that football and men’s basketball would have to share their budgets with other non-revenue generating sports, which would lead to a “loss of spectator interest.” The AIAW leaders could not disagree more. They charged that the male leaders clearly overreacted about football. Amidst the confusion, the Office of Civil Rights expected schools to conduct self-examinations until finally the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) issued a policy clarification in 1979.


12 See Festle, *Playing Nice*. On Title IX, see Hogshead-Makar and Zimbalist, *Equal Play*.
15 Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 253, 255.


Hardin and Shain, “Feeling Much Smaller Than You Know You Are” 326.

Creedon, *Women, Media and Sport*.


Kay Mills, *A Place in the News: From the Women’s Pages to the Front Page,* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1988): 219. Women have been hardly been absent from sports journalism and recent scholarship has been reviving the work of female journalists who wrote about sports. Dave Kaszuba documented that women did cover sports in the 1920s, often changing the tone of the sports pages with their “unique voice,” even supporting a “progressive feminist agenda.” But these women were only a handful, and they represented exceptions rather than institutionalized practices. See, Dave Kaszuba, “Bringing Women to the Sports Pages: Margaret Gross and the 1920s,” *American Journalism* 23, no. 2 (2006): 13-44. Dave Kaszuba, “Ringside, Hearthside: Sports Scribe Jane Dixon Embody Struggle of Jazz Age Women Caught Between Two Worlds,” *Journalism History* 53, no. 3 (2009): 141-150.


The limitation of these studies is that they are solely based upon the perceptions of college students, and therefore the generalizability is questionable. However, the findings offer an insight into the tremendous weight social identity markers carry. See Dana Mastro and others, “The Wide World of Sports Reporting The Influence of Gender- and Race-Based Expectations on Evaluations of Sports Reporters,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (2012): 458–474. Laurence W. Etling and others, “Just Like One of the Guys?: Perceptions of Male and Female Sportscasters’ Voices,” *Journal of Sports Media* 6, no. 2 (2011): 1–21.

Hardin and Shain, “‘Feeling Much Smaller than You Know You Are,’” 334.
Knoppers and Elling, “We Do Not Engage in Promotional Journalism.”
Marie Hardin, “Stopped at the Gate,” 72. See also, Knoppers and Elling, “We Do Not Engage in Promotional Journalism.”
Hardin, “Stopped at the Gate.”
Chapter 3

Planting a Seed: Men’s Memories of Women’s Sports and Title IX

In 1989, assessing the relationship between sport, media, and society, scholar Lawrence Wenner stated, “In many ways, the sports press provides a socially sanctioned gossip sheet for men in America, a place where great deal of conjecture is placed upon ‘heroes’ and events of little worldly import.” Drawing a parallel between “the societally devalued ‘gossip’ that appears on the ‘women’s’ or ‘society’ pages of many metropolitan daily newspapers,” Wenner suggested that sport media serve as a socializing force, “as the debutante’s male counterpart learns of the significance of the sporting world and its heroes.” In the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of television and advertising, sport media turned into an uncontrollable commercial giant. Thus, into the late 1980s, a time period Wenner references, sport media indeed became a ubiquitous force of US culture, conveying ideals about contemporary life.¹

The role of sports media’s function for communal bonding and entertainment dates back to the 1920s, but these functions became even more prominent in the second half of the 20th century. Scholars writing in the post-World War II decades found that sport served as a significant socializing force for boys and men, and sport media, by extension, provided an avenue cognitive development, social integration, socialization, and enjoyment. Its role to entertain, however, overshadowed the profession’s reputation. Sports journalism was devalued in the society. Pointing to this problem, media scholar Tim Wulfemeyer wrote in the mid-1980s, “The general public does not perceive any visible, unified, and concerted effort among sportswriters to practice their craft in a
consistently ethical manner.” To distance themselves from such reputation, Wulfemeyer argued that sports journalists should not advocate for certain teams, accept freebies from teams, rely on public relations material, or write about athletes’ personal lives. In sum, at the time when sports journalism struggled to establish ethical standards, sport media grew into a primal outlet for men to learn about preferred gender norms in US culture.²

In this chapter, I introduce the sports journalists who grew up in the pre-Title IX period (i.e., before 1972) and entered into the sports journalism industry before or immediately after Congress passed the law. As such, I focus on the stories of Bob Frisk, Skip Myslenski, Owen Youngman, Taylor Bell, Bob Sakamoto and John Radtke. Through their childhood memories, memories of sports journalism, and memories of women’s sports, this chapter addresses how journalists remembered their first exposure to women’s sport and to gender issues. Despite the profession’s questionable reputation, many of the men I talked to saw sports journalism as a dream job. Those who grew up in Chicago admired (men’s) professional teams, such as the White Sox (baseball), the Cubs (baseball), the Bulls (basketball), or the Bears (football). They also participated in sport as children and dreamt of becoming professional athletes. Early experiences with sport, both as fans and as participants, drew them into the world of sports. But once they reached their limit as athletes, they had to looking for an alternative career that would allow them to remain a part of the sport culture.

The men I talked to found that perfect career: In pursuit of their passion, they became sports writers for national and local newspapers, including the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times and the Arlington Heights Daily Herald. Although the sports section held a solid spot in the papers, sports journalism as a profession struggled to gain
respect. Dubbed as the “toy department” of the newspaper, sports newsrooms did not appear as the most prestigious choice for young men growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. But for these men, sports journalism seemed fitting and fun. Many, as I illustrate, never had another career and continue to write about sports even in their years of retirement.

In reflecting upon their entrances to sport and sports journalism, the men provide an insight in how participation and work in sport shaped their ideas about gender. Journalists attributed their early attention to girls’ and women’s sports to other, very personal, encounters related to their family and upbringing. The men whom I interviewed vividly recalled childhood experiences, which in their memories planted seeds for them to pay attention to and, later, write about girls’ and women’s sports. In the years preceding Title IX, a federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex at educational institution, these journalists began to sporadically shine a spotlight unto girls’ and women’s accomplishments in the local, national, and international sports landscape. Later, when athletic administrators fought over enforcement of Title IX, these journalists articulated conflicting ideas about the law’s influence upon women’s sports, men’s sports, and media coverage. As this chapter illustrates, Title IX’s cultural influence affected only some journalists at some sports departments, and did so slowly—several years after the increase in participation. Sports journalists attributed their newspapers’ work in keeping up with the changing gender norms to their personal experiences with girls’ and women’s sports as much as—or perhaps even more so than--to larger national trends that resulted from feminist activism.
Historical Context

During World War II, when the men went away, middle-class women assumed new roles in the family and public life. Women found jobs outside of the home, which rearranged family structures and conventional gender norms. As a response, in the 1950s “masculinist social policy” attempted to restore the “father-headed family” of the pre-war era, while sport became, what Varda Burstyn calls “the sine qua non of patriotic American boyhood and masculinity.” But two major structural forces, the labor market and the emerging women’s movement, further challenged the role of men and women in society. Women gained access to education in increasing numbers and their participation in the workforce grew from 20 percent to 45 between 1950 and 1990. Although these changes affected women differently based on class and race, the brief and certainly simplified description of changing gender roles provides contextual information for understanding the upbringing of the sports journalists in this chapter.3

Through these decades, sport remained a male preserve. Women enjoyed few participation outlets, but—because of the scarcity of competitive opportunities—these leagues and tournaments are that much more important for understanding the history of sport and trends in coverage. In the mid-20th century, athletic associations, league owners, and physical educators carefully policed women’s athletic endeavors by enforcing rigid standards of appearance, clothing, and rules. Notably, female athletes had to appear in ways consistent with dominant ideals of femininity. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), which launched in 1942, with teams from all over the Midwest, serves as an illustrative example. Historians Susan Cahn and Jean
O’Rilley write that the male league directors “conceived of their product [the AAGPBL] as a dramatic contrast between feminine girls and masculine skill, requiring players to wear pastel-colored uniforms, keep their hair long, and attend preseason charm and beauty classes.” These attitudes corresponded with contemporary anxieties about the erosion of the nuclear family structure. As these opportunities also diminished, women who competed in sports, and thus violated expectations around femininity, faced scrutiny. Stigmas associated with masculinity and lesbianism placed athletic women under scrutiny. These prevalent and harmful perception about female athletes at the time ultimately placed yet another barrier and further deterred women from participating in sports.4

On the scholastic level, women’s colleges on the East Coast provided select sporting opportunities, such as basketball and field hockey, since the late 19th century. During much of the early- to mid-20th century, physical educators debated about the role of competition. On the one hand, they viewed women’s participation in sport as healthy and pro-social, but on the other hand they worried that the problems of men’s sport would filter into women’s sport and potentially harm them. In some sports, girls and women played under different rules than the boys and men. For instance, in basketball the court was divided as to restrict movement and contact. Referred to as “six-on-six” basketball, each team designated three players as forwards and three as guards. The forwards stayed in one part of the court, while the guards stayed in the other part, Girls’ basketball in this form became highly prominent in some areas of the country, most notably in Iowa. In 1954, the Iowa Girls’ High School Athletic Union established statewide programs and tournaments for girls, equaling that of the boys. Girls’ basketball in Iowa, according to
sport historians Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, “became a source of community pride.” The state tournaments would draw thousands of fans and enhanced competitiveness among the teams. Although Iowa may have been ahead of time in establishing competitive opportunities for girls, shortly thereafter, the interscholastic sport landscape across the nation began to change.\(^5\)

In 1964, sport historian Jaime Schultz documents that the American Medical Association pronounced the existing conditions for girls’ and women’s physical activity inadequate. In response to the widespread changes in gender norms (read: women’s movement) and to this new information from the medical field, physical educators began to reconsider their approach to competition. In 1965 the Division for Girls’ and Women’s Sports (DGWS) established the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) and by 1972, the CIAW sponsored national championships in badminton, basketball, golf, gymnastics, tennis, track and field, and swimming and diving. To attend to the growth of women’s programs, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) formed and took over administrative duties. Also in 1972, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) decided to extend sponsorship to women’s sports. Much of the 1970s were characterized by legal debates between the AIAW and the NCAA over the oversight of women’s athletics, ultimately leading to the disintegration of the AIAW. The NCAA’s “hostile takeover” of the AIAW and of women’s sports, as Cahn called it, began a drastic shift in the values and purpose associated with women’s sport.\(^6\)

But 1972 marked another significant push in women’s sport. Congress passed Title IX, a legislation that prohibits discrimination based on sex at federally funded
institutions. Although Bernice Sandler, called the “godmother of Title IX,” conceived of the legislation alongside Democratic Representative Patsy Mink in order to prohibit schools from denying acceptance to women on the basis of sex, and not to ensure more opportunities for athletic participation, the law had tremendous effect on intercollegiate sports. Title IX became a site of contestation over which leaders of men’s programs, concerned with football, panicked that the law—and women’s athletics—would destroy college athletics as we know it. Confusion about the law’s implementation (i.e., how do schools adhere to Title IX to avoid penalties) permeated much of the 1970s, until the Office of Civil Rights finally issued a policy clarification known as the “Three-Part Test” to guide schools in compliance in 1979. The debate between the AIAW and the NCAA over the purpose and governance of women’s sports to a large extent revolved around Title IX. While the AIAW fought for Title IX enforcement and for a model of women sport that would lead to “enrichment of the life of participant” and “equitable competition at all levels,” the NCAA vehemently opposed Title IX and pushed for a continued dominance of the male-commercial-model of intercollegiate athletics.⁷

The emergence of girls’ and women’s competitive sport provided new ground for sports journalists. As I illustrate, many of the men who worked for Chicago newspapers in the 1970s remembered seeing female athletes succeed early in their childhood. As sports journalists, they faced a dilemma on how and to what extent they should cover girls’ and women’s sports. Further, their self-reflective accounts provide conflicting recollections of their respective attitudes toward Title IX during the law’s first decade. Sports journalists’ memories of Title IX both reflect popular narratives and confirm existing ideological contestations around gender equity in sport. This chapter provides a
more nuanced understanding of Title IX’s cultural influence (or lack thereof) on sports journalism in Chicago.8

Memories of Sport: The Path to Sports Journalism

Sports journalists, all men in this case (as women entered sports departments a few years later), became exposed to sports early in their childhoods. Many of the Chicago-natives remembered attending White Sox or Cubs baseball games (rarely both). Sports journalists who hailed from rural areas in the Midwest (such as a small town in Iowa or Ohio) without professional teams in the vicinity attended high school games. All the men played sports at one point, but only up to their high school years the latest. None of the six sports journalists pursued elite-level sporting opportunities. In fact, after recognizing their own athletic limitations, journalists identified sports journalism as the second-best career choice. As youngsters, these men were good writers and loved sports: A career in sports journalism provided an outlet for both passions.

In 1950, Bob Frisk declared his life ambition as “sportswriter” in his eighth-grade yearbook. “I mean who figures that … back in those days it’s either a lawyer or whatever,” Frisk recalled. “I always wanted to do this.” Frisk knew early on that he wanted to be a sportswriter and his goal came true: For fifty years, he served as sports editor of the Arlington Heights Daily Herald, in Arlington Heights, Chicago’s northwestern suburb. As a child, he attended professional baseball and football games with his father, who was a sports fan. Frisk’s sister was six years older and had different interests than her brother. To occupy his time, Frisk used to write stories. By the time he
started high school, he knew he wanted to be a sportswriter. An incident during his sophomore year further convinced him to take that path. Frisk was working at a Jewel grocery store in Arlington Heights on a Saturday when all of a sudden he dropped a huge bottle of ammonia. “I didn’t get fired,” Frisk said, “but I thought ‘this is it.’” Two days later, he walked into the *Herald* newsroom where he met sports editor Bob (Robert) Paddock, the grandson of Hosea Paddock, the paper’s first owner. Paddock put Frisk to task right away to cover Little League baseball. Frisk kept returning over the summers, until he finally joined the staff for good after graduating from college, “I never had another job,” Frisk admitted. “I stayed and I’m not story at all I stayed.” Frisk decided to become a sportswriter at 14 and pursued his ambition until he retired at 72.

I begin with Bob Frisk’s story because even though his experience of staying at the same paper for half a century is unique, the path that led him to sports journalism is not. Similar to Frisk, other sports journalists came to love sports by attending professional sporting events with their families, most notably with their fathers. John Radtke, who worked for suburban papers including at the *Daily Herald* under Frisk, remembered attending Cubs games with his father and his foster siblings. He grew up on a dairy farm west of St. Charles, Illinois, 40 miles west of Chicago. After his mother died when he was seven, Radtke’s father remarried. Growing up, Radtke played baseball and football. “I wasn’t much of an athlete,” Radtke said. “But I had a great interest in statistics and sports in general.” This interest led him to write for the high school student newspaper and eventually the *DeKalb Daily Chronicle* still while still in high school. Although Radtke quit sports journalism several times to pursue other career options, he always returned. “I left [sports journalism] out of frustration a couple of times more than
anything,” Radtke explained. “What I found was, this is what I do best. And, you know, now that I’ve been back into it for twenty years, I wouldn’t do anything else. There is a comfort zone in this business for me.” Radtke felt comfortable in the sports culture to which he became accustomed as a child.10

Early exposure to the sports culture, specifically of professional baseball and football, contributed to sports journalists’ level of comfort with the profession. Bob Sakamoto, former sports writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, served as a bat boy with the Chicago White Sox during his high school years. He remembered that if he earned good enough grades, the school would allow him to leave early to work the day games. “I realized I enjoyed professional sports,” Sakamoto remembered. “At one time, I thought I could be the next shortstop for the White Sox when I get older.” He soon realized that his level of play did not quite equal that of the professional players, “So I thought, what’s the next best thing?” At the baseball games, Sakamoto observed the sportswriters and how they did their jobs. “They were a part of this whole kind of culture of pro sports,” Sakamoto said. “So I thought, okay, maybe I’ll try to become a sportswriter.”11 Other sports journalists followed this line of thinking. Taylor Bell, longtime high school sports editor at the *Chicago Daily News* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, played a variety of sports growing up, but his main sport was baseball. Just like Sakamoto, Bell aspired to a career in professional sports and, when that goal fell through, sports journalism presented itself as an alternative. “Like most sportswriters it was the idea that I wanted to stay as close to sports as I could,” Bell explained his decision to become a sports journalist. “I wanted to go as far as I could in sports but obviously I wasn’t good enough to play in the Yankee Stadium.” He was, however, good enough to become a sportswriter and become a part of
the sports culture. Sports journalists, as these two men observed, did not just stand on the sidelines: They played an integral role in maintaining and shaping Chicago’s sports landscape.

Sports journalists who grew up outside of the Chicago-area in smaller Midwestern communities did not have similar exposure to professional sports, but they became integrated into sports culture through local interscholastic sports. Mike Conklin, who grew up in Lisbon, Iowa, before he moved to Chicago to work for the Tribune, played baseball, fast-pitch softball, and basketball in his childhood. Similar to Sakamoto, who later became his colleague at the Tribune, Conklin soon had to find another point of access to sports. In high school, he got cut from the teams. “You had to be pretty bad to get cut in a small school like that,” Conklin said. Instead of giving up on sports altogether, Conklin with a few other students first lobbied the school—successfully—to start a wrestling program. He participated in wrestling throughout high school. But he also wanted to stay involved with other sports. “I wanted to continue going to the games,” Conklin explained his decision to become a sportswriter. “The local newspaper hired me then to become a correspondent in high school to cover those high school basketball games I couldn’t play in.” Working for a newspaper was all Conklin ever wanted to do. “I loved to look at my byline in the newspaper,” Conklin said. “And I was getting paid for it. I thought that was pretty nice too. So it’s just all I’ve ever done.”

Working for newspapers and writing about the teams allowed the men to stay involved with sport.

Some sports journalists, though few, expressed no aspiration of pursuing a career in athletics, even though they did participate in sports growing up. Skip Myslenski,
whose father coached the Catholic Youth Association baseball team in South Euclid, Ohio, played on the team and won the city championships. He also ran track, a sport which he continued to pursue recreationally and loved to cover later in his life. But he did not want to be a star athlete. Instead, he aspired to be a teacher. “As the oldest boy in a family in the 1950s, the tradition was you were going to follow in your father’s footsteps,” Myslenski told the story. “So I was going to be an English teacher. And to this day, I’m telling you, I have no idea why, but shortly before my senior year at Notre Dame, I said ‘I don’t want to do that.’ This was like one of the great rebellions of all time.” He obtained an accelerated graduate degree at Northwestern and eventually landed a job at Sports Illustrated. Myslenski came to the Tribune in 1978, after five years at the Philadelphia Inquirer and proceeded to work in sports journalism from 1968 until his retirement.13

The stories of these six men, who spent most, if not all, their lives in sports journalism, reveal important cultural, economic and social elements. First, in the 1950s and 1960s, the men perceived the sports culture and sports journalism and welcoming and comfortable. Whether they grew up in the Chicago-area or in the rural Midwest, boys saw their older siblings, their fathers, and professional men’s players actively participate in sports—and pursue a career in sports. In other words, for these men organized sports meant a great deal in the formulation of their interests and ambitions. Many of them saw a career in sports journalism as a way to maintain that connection with the sport culture.14
Memories of Women’s Sports: Gender Roles

During the 1940s and 1950s, when they boys developed their connections to sport, girls and women were virtually completely absent from that realm. World War II altered women’s roles in the US society whereby women assumed jobs previously reserved to men only, but war-time changes, as historians contend, only carried over to some type of work for some women—they did not lead to fundamental transformation of social gender roles. Midwestern women did gain some opportunities to participate in sport, most notably through the All-American Girls Baseball League, which launched upon the absence of baseball during World War II. Girls and women’s sports also became prominent in certain pockets of the US, where the teams enjoyed community support. By the 1960s and into the 1970s more and more schools began to incorporate girls’ teams. These sporadic disruptions may have had limited impact overall, but for the boys who would later become sports journalists for major Chicago newspapers, seeing women outside of contemporary gender scripts left a lasting impact. Sports journalists attributed their respect and commitment to women’s sports to their families, especially to their working mothers, and to early exposure to watching girls and women play sports.¹⁵

Reflecting upon their attitudes as sports journalists, the men who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s cited progressive family values as influential in the way they viewed social roles. Growing up in rural Ohio in the 1940s, Skip Myslenski remembered that his family stood out from the rest of their neighborhood as they often engaged in mini-desegregating efforts. Myslenski’s father would invite a black friend to their house and he sent his children, including Myslenski, to a predominantly Jewish high school. These
actions, Myslenski explained, were far from typical for a Polish-Catholic family. “So all of those stratification in society, you know, I was not exposed to them,” Myslenski said. Myslenski’s family also disrupted gendered divisions of labor. As the oldest of three boys, Myslenski did much of the housework, such as washing clothes, doing the dishes, making the bed and scrubbing the floor. He felt “liberated from an early age” from the social structures and learned to respect people. “My father always found something in the person to respect and I think I just picked up on that,” Myslenski remembered. The respect transferred onto his treatment of women. Reflecting on how his background shaped his journalism career, including coverage of women’s sports, Myslenski observed, “[It was] just that osmosis that you treated people as people.” When I asked Myslenski how he approached covering women’s sports, he echoed the same sentiments: He insisted that he treated female athletes as people. Thus, parents, and roles within the family structure, provided a model that the children emulated. 16

Two of the men named their mothers as influential figures in their upbringings and in their understanding of women’s role in the society. Mike Conklin, later a Chicago Tribune journalists, grew up in rural Iowa where his mother worked as a clerk in a grocery store and later as an accountant at the local college. “I can always remember my mother working,” Conklin recalled. “She was always into self-improvement. I came from a family of working people.” Conklin credited his mother for finishing college. After quitting school, his mother’s job at a college enabled him to take classes to acquire the necessary credits to graduate.

Taylor Bell’s mother influenced his son’s educational path, but she also awakened Bell’s passion to become a journalist. Bell’s mother graduated from the University of
Illinois with a degree in journalism, which as Bell remembered was unique for a woman. After raising her three children, Bell’s mother worked at the local public library. “I got my journalism genes from her,” Bell, who followed his mother’s footsteps, said. But his mother gave him another reason to pursue journalism at Illinois. “I remember her telling me on our trip to Champaign to look at the campus and so forth one time in the summer I graduated high school,” Bell began. “She talked about the Daily Illini, the college newspaper and how good of a paper it was and she know how active it was.” Conklin’s and Bell’s mothers did not only play a key role in their sons’ education, but they also shaped the way in which they thought about women’s labor and contributions to the society.17

Additional to family influences, sports journalists cited early memories of watching girls and women play sport as influential in their subsequent careers. The first memory of women’s sports came from Bob Frisk. Frisk used to visit his grandparents in Rockford, Illinois, in the 1940s, when he was a child. His grandparents took him to a nearby baseball stadium where he would watch the athletes whom the locals at that time treated as town heroes. “Every Sunday when I was in Rockford we would go see the Rockford Peaches play,” Frisk recalled. The Rockford Peaches were one of the four founding members of the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBL), which began competition in 1943. Frisk remembered the big crowds. He also vividly remembered one of the players, Dottie Kamenshek. “She was better than most guys that I saw play,” Frisk evaluated. “And watching women meant nothing to me. They were just good athletes.” At the time when conventional gender norms rendered female athletes as practically non-existent and de-valued, Frisk had access to one of the few spaces in the country where
women excelled in sport and their excellence drew spectators. The Rockford Peaches “planted a seed” for Frisk who subsequently “never thought women were that bad of athletes.” Because these women, in Frisk’s mind, transcended a certain level of athleticism (e.g., Kamenshek was “better than most guys”), he remembered them as athletes—not as women. Frisk’s impression that women were “just good athletes” carried into his memories of the time when he advocated for girls’ and women’s sports coverage as an editor at the Daily Herald.  

Even those who did not have access to the AAGBL remembered watching girls and women play sports. Conklin did not have to look far: He would attend the softball and basketball games of his ten-years-older sister, whom he remembered as a “really good athlete.” Living in Lisbon, Iowa, positioned Conklin in a unique place in relation to women’s sports. “Iowa was one of those states like Tennessee, and I think there were a couple of other ones, that were really groundbreaking when it comes to women’s sports,” Conklin explained. “My high school had a great tradition of female athletes.” The tradition particularly applied to basketball. Girls’ basketball in Iowa served as a source of pride for the community; the state tournament drew thousands of fans. Conklin’s school participated in maintaining Iowa’s girls’ basketball tradition. “I can clearly remember the best athletes in our high school were the girls,” Conklin said. “The boys’ teams were not very good.” The opportunities for girls did not extend much beyond basketball, but these teams (as well as his involvement in wrestling) influenced Conklin enough to later pay attention to the status of interscholastic sports for women and for minor men’s sports.  

Girls’ basketball put female athletes on the map and into the consciousness of aspiring sports journalists. Owen Youngman, who spent thirty-seven years at the Tribune
in a variety of positions including as associate sports editor, worked for a high school
ewspaper in Ashtabula, Ohio, and actually covered girls’ basketball. He did so in 1970,
two years before Title IX passed and several years before schools realized that Title IX
applied to athletic programs. “I was very young then,” Youngman said. “I can’t tell you
the history behind the decision to do it. But I think that the expectation that girls would
participate in interscholastic sports didn’t really much exist.” The school began
sponsoring the team only that year. The community, Youngman recalled, responded well
to the team, without animosity or prejudice. Press exposure certainly helped. “The more
we wrote about [the team] in the paper, the more people came to the games,” Youngman
said. “By covering it in the paper, [we] told people what was going on, and they came.
More than just the families came out, which had sort of been the expectation originally.”

As a high school student, Youngman did not only attend girls’ games. He claimed the
responsibility of covering them and, thereby, contributed to the acceptance of the team
within the community.

By the time the sports journalists assumed their positions at Chicago papers, such
as the Chicago Tribune, the Daily News and the Daily Herald, they had already witnessed
women, a mother, a sister or classmates, breaking out of societal norms. Sports
journalists attributed their attitudes toward gender to childhood experiences, and most
notably to experiences of seeing girls and women compete in sports. Women’s
opportunities for participation remained scarce. The All-American Girls’ Baseball
League, which Frisk witnessed, folded after the men returned from World War II and
baseball rejuvenated. Girls’ basketball saw a stark decline in the 1960s and only began to
recover in the early 1970s. Yet, exposure to these athletic contests, as Frisk put it
“planted a seed” for the sports journalists to attend to female athletes in their work.²⁰

Memories of Title IX: Gradual Change

The 1970s brought about significant legal and cultural changes for women’s
sports. State- and federal-level measures unrelated to sports seeped into various areas of
the society, including sports, and thereby mobilized change in opportunities and
resources. Yet, the changes only slowly seeped into media coverage—or not at all. The
representation of women’s sports continued to stagnate on both local and on national
levels, leaving the media as one of the areas of “major inequalities” for female athletes.
To gain a better understanding of the attitudes about legislative changes in sports in the
1970s and 1980s, I asked sports journalists what they remembered about Title IX. The
urgency to become familiar with Title IX and to cover Title IX-related issues affected
Chicago newspapers differently depending on the focus of the sports department.

Sports journalists who worked for newspapers with a local focus recalled that
state laws and, later, federal laws (Title IX) that prohibited discrimination based on sex
affected the schools in their purview, and thus the papers’ coverage. Perhaps no other
paper’s sports section attended to these changes more closely than Bob Frisk’s Daily
Herald. Since 1967, the newspaper sponsored a sporting event titled the Paddock
Olympics—named after the owners of the Daily Herald—to provide an outlet for girls
and boys to play sports. With awareness of the lack of sporting chances for girls, the
Daily Herald published stories lamenting about this problem and arguing for an expansion of opportunities.21

When Title IX came into effect, Frisk recalled, the community welcomed the changes. “I don’t remember any really negative reaction [to the law], to be honest with you,” Frisk said. At that point, he had been at the Herald for fourteen years. “I think it was just something we accepted. I don’t remember people being, you know, throwing up their arms.” Frisk speculated that the reaction might have been unique to the Arlington area, a fairly affluent community where the parents demanded opportunities for their daughters. The transition to incorporate girls’ sports into high schools as well as coverage was, according to Frisk, “gradual and it seemed to work.” As sports editor, he initially received letters from local coaches asking for more attention to girls’ and women’s sports. The expansion of the paper allowed the sports editor and his writers to oblige. Although Frisk recognized that some of the sports journalists on staff were “male chauvinists,” for the most part, he did not remember having any trouble with awakening interest in writers to cover women’s sports. Frisk showed awareness of the complaints against Title IX according to which the law hurt men’s sports because it prompted colleges to drop men’s programs, but he did not share in these concerns. Even though he thought the situation was “tricky,” he thought women should get treated fairly: “Maybe I’m prejudiced because I like women’s sports so much.” In Frisk’s memory, the Daily Herald, and its community, embraced Title IX and the changes the law brought to women’s sports.22

But others, even Daily Herald journalists, asserted that both Title IX enforcement and sports departments’ comprehension of Title IX’s role in athletics took time. John
Radtke, who worked for the *Elgin Courier-News* in the 1970s and 1980s and joined the *Herald* later in his career, said that even though girls gradually acquired better opportunities for sports, they did not receive equal treatment in schools until well into the 1990s. “I think that what mainly changed was that people started getting a better understanding of what *Title IX* was all about,” Radtke said. “Even though *Title IX* was enacted in 1972, it really got shoved under the rug for several years.” He remembered a major *Title IX* lawsuit that the Elgin High School parents filed on behalf of their daughters. That lawsuit occurred in 2001. Radtke wrote a decade later that area school officials should have provided better facilities and better participation opportunities to girls’ much earlier than that. As a concluding thought, Radtke reflected, that if administrators had made these adjustments earlier “a lawsuit never would have been necessary.”

Based on these reflections, the *Daily Herald*’s relationship to women’s sports seemed mediated less by *Title IX* in particular and more by state-level legislation and local community members. According to Frisk’s memories, coaches and physical educators put pressure on schools to provide more opportunities for girls and on the *Herald* to better attend to girls’ sports. Notably, Frisk remembered the community’s reception of *Title IX* reception as smooth and immediate, Radtke remembered it as rocky and slow. This discrepancy in accounts may be attributed to the fact the Frisk assessed the changes based on fifty years at the *Herald*, while Radke entered the profession later and joined the *Herald* when *Title IX* should have already been implemented in full force. Regardless, because *Title IX* affected schools and the *Herald* focused heavily on high school sports, the sports journalists had to, at least, follow developments around *Title IX*. 
With this local focus, they remembered Title IX as a necessary and important law to provide better opportunities for girls and women.

At the Chicago Daily News and later at the Chicago Sun-Times, where Bell oversaw high school sports, girls’ sports occupied prominent place following the expansions of teams at Illinois high schools. Title IX played a key role in that process. Bell felt that with the implementation of Title IX “there was more opportunity, more participation obviously and there was more pressure put on the IHSA to accept some of these things.” After the Illinois High School Association began sponsoring state tournaments for girls in sports such as tennis, track and field, and volleyball in 1973 and later in gymnastics, soccer, cross country and softball, the Daily News decided to hold a banquet and establish All-State, All-Area and Athlete of the Year awards—similar to the ones for boys—to honor female athletes. Girls’ basketball, which Bell remembered as becoming more prominent in 1977, further contributed to the prominence of girls’ sport in schools. Title IX, Bell said, eventually led to coverage but did not necessarily put pressure on newspapers. “We just felt that’s what we had to do,” Bell said. “You know, on Sundays, we would have a full-page girls’ roundup, a full page boys’ roundup. Then we would cover whatever major games there were.” He added that “there was no question that there was more exposure” of girls’ sports after Title IX.24

Not all welcomed the law with open arms. Reflecting upon the time period Bell said, “There is no question that when Title IX came in there was a lot of eye-roll.” Elaborating on the problems, Bell explained, “Title IX has created a lot of problems then, and it is creating a lot of problems now. It’s a positive thing on the one hand, and you can look at how negative it is on the other hand.” Bell expressed deep concerns over the
perceived impacts of Title IX upon intercollegiate athletic budgets. Bell felt that the financial well-being of college athletics went down the drain because “in the past, before Title IX obviously, colleges were still in trouble,” but football, which “pays the bills” now “no longer pays all of the bills because Title IX has opened up sports for everybody.” Bell argued that the law “gave an opportunity to so many women” both on the high school and the college levels, which then also enabled the launch of professional leagues, such as the WNBA, but he also pointed out the negative consequences, “It seems to me that the founders of Title IX didn’t realize in the end what a monster they created.” According to Bell, Title IX contributed to the expansion of opportunities for girls and women’s sports, which he saw as a positive, but he also thought the law threatened the financial well-being of intercollegiate sports. His memories suggest that Title IX did contribute, indirectly, to more coverage of high school girls’ sports, but also reflect what women’s sports advocates would identify as myths around Title IX. That Title IX made sports financially dependent upon football and led to a draught of the athletic budget is among the many culturally prevalent perceptions about the law, but not the only one.

At the Chicago Tribune, a paper with a national scope journalists generally held positive views about Title IX’s influence on girls’ and women’s sports, but some held negative attitudes about the law’s perceived detriment to men’s sports or ignored the law altogether. Sports journalists remembered confusion, resistance, and indifference about Title IX. Bob Sakamoto, who covered college sports for the Suburban Tribune (the Chicago Tribune’s suburban insert) from 1980 onward and subsequently moved to the Tribune in the mid-1980s, expressed ambivalence about the law. “I don’t know if [Title IX] affected me at the beginning because I wasn’t sure how it was going to work out,”
Sakamoto said, referring to the implementation debates. “So I remember, the first couple of years thinking nothing really changed much.” Once the courts started reinforcing Title IX’s provisions, he added, “then it started to hit journalists a little bit that we have to start covering women’s sports.” Sakamoto’s memories imply that once opportunities for women expanded, the Tribune felt the need to cover women’s sports. Some of the men in the sports department took upon women’s sport stories “grudgingly.” Sports journalists, according to Sakamoto, felt like it was being forced on them, that they would rather spend more newspaper ink and more space on the men’s sports, and we were being forced to cover women’s sports.” These attitudes, as they live in Sakamoto’s memory, reflected men’s sports administrators’ concerns, who lamented that increased resources to women’s sports would be at the detriment of men’s sports. Just as athletic directors felt forced to add women’s teams, so did sports journalists feel forced to cover women’s sports.

Some sports journalists welcomed the opportunity to cover women’s sports, but they did not embrace Title IX in its initial articulations. In other words, their attitudes towards Title IX did not correspond with attitudes toward women’s sports. Mike Conklin, for instance, covered women’s sports extensively and advocated for a greater acceptance of female athletes in a number of his articles. Yet, he worried about the law’s implications upon men’s sports. “I was kind of resentful of [Title IX] at first because ... I thought a lot of it was the death knell for a lot of men’s sports ... And it bothered me because I saw a number of programs kind of go in the toilet a little bit.” Conklin, who lobbied for a wrestling team during his high school years, worried that men’s wrestling and gymnastics programs began to get cut. He admitted that he used to side with men’s
athletic directors in blaming Title IX for these changes. And he was not alone in the newsroom. Consistent with Sakamoto’s memories, Conklin also remembered that his colleagues, some of the “hard-crusted entrenched guys,” were “even more resentful” towards Title IX than he was. He insisted, however, that he opposed the cutting of men’s teams, not the growth of women’s teams. “I was not necessarily against some sort of Title IX, but it was a) the way it was sort of implemented by some people bothered me and b) I didn’t think it was quite the right formula.” That said, Conklin considered Title IX as a necessary force to help raise the profile of women’s sports.26

These concerns and debates about Title IX affected Tribune sports journalists selectively—only those, such as Sakamoto and Conklin, who predominantly covered college sports. Other Tribune journalists including Youngman and Myslenski never recalled actually talking about Title IX in the newsroom. Youngman, who worked as an editor in sports rather than a reporter, remembered “I never said the word ‘Title IX’ in the newsroom. We obviously ran stories about Title IX … But it really didn’t drive coverage.” Myslenski who covered mainly professional sports remembered neither talking about Title IX with his colleagues, nor that the law shaped what he covered and how he covered the events. In fact, even Conklin said Title IX did not cause much stir in the newsroom, “It was just business as usual.” He added that, the only way Title IX might have changed attitudes toward women’s sports for the better is if the sports editor had a daughter, who was then able to receive a scholarship thanks to Title IX.

Sports journalists’ memories about Title IX suggest that the law’s impact upon girls’ and women’s sports coverage varied depending on the scope of the paper and the editor’s/journalist’s focus. The Daily Herald, a suburban paper, covered the few
opportunities for girls and their expansion even before Title IX. The growth in opportunities resulted from state-wide legislations and push from community members. These strategies rarely—and not until the early 2000s—entailed using Title IX as a tool. The *Herald* journalists did not remember having any negative feelings toward Title IX or its implementation—in fact, many thought that Title IX should not have been necessary in the first place: That social changes should have filtered into sports. At the *Daily News*, and later the *Sun-Times*, Bell attributed the expansion of girls’ sports to Title IX and recognized that girls received, as a result, more coverage. As such, Title IX had an indirect impact on the sports pages. The *Tribune* journalists who covered interscholastic sports remembered resentment among their colleagues and even admitted feeling resentful toward Title IX. Others yet did not even recall talking about Title IX.

It is noteworthy from the interviews that, regardless their attitudes about Title IX, the sports journalists did not feel that the law had any *actual* impact on the sports newsroom. In other words, sports journalists recognized the importance of Title IX for women’s sports, but did not remember that these changes drastically shifted *attitudes* about women’s sports within their newsrooms. Other factors, perhaps structural factors carried more significant impact on women’s sports coverage.27

**Conclusion**

In a study of boys’ socialization into organized sports, sociologist Michael Messner found that for men who grew up in the mid- and late-20th century “playing sports was ‘just the thing to do.’” Consistent with this observation, the men I interviewed
considered participation in sports as a natural component of boyhood. Further, after realizing their athletic potential—which usually ended in high school—sports journalism became a natural extension of the sports culture to which the boys longed to belong. For those who grew up in Chicago, family members, most notably fathers and brothers played an important role in the development of, what Messner called, “emotional salience of sports” and of the boys’ identity through sport. While boys’ connection to sports—and by extension sports journalism—came through professional men’s sports, their early memories of gender roles within the family structure and of watching female athletes play disrupt masculine narratives about sport. In reflecting upon their own work, journalists cited events from childhood as factors that would later prompt them to better attend to coverage of girls’ and women’s sports.28

In terms of Title IX’s disruptive potential as pertaining to the sports newsrooms, the men articulated a range of positions. These stories do not create a cohesive narrative, but they do reflect general trends scholars have observed about Title IX, as well as offer new insight into Title IX’s role in sports journalism history. Sports journalists reproduced well-established scripts about Title IX and its’ implications. On the one hand, sports journalists framed Title IX as an enabler of participation opportunities for women—which they generally viewed as a positive contribution. On the other hand, sports journalists believed (or used to believe) that Title IX hurt college athletics and men’s sports in particular. Sports journalists’ memories also reflect deeply engrained narratives and myths around Title IX—narratives that scholars and women’s sports advocates identify harmful and even inaccurate. In fact, the perceptions articulated by some of the journalists, including the claim that men’s programs, particularly football, brings in all
the money as well as the claim that Title IX contributed to the erosion of men’s teams, are at best misguided at worst completely inaccurate. Neither economic patterns, nor team dropping patterns can then be attributed to Title IX, yet these perceptions prominently surfaced in sports journalists’ memories about Title IX.29

Some of the men’s attitudes—or more specifically men’s memories of their and their colleagues’ attitudes about Title IX—are consistent with data from national surveys which found that sports editors expressed resentment toward Title IX. Disturbingly, though hardly surprisingly, their explanations of why Title IX was “negative” contained misinformation about the law, its implementation and its consequences. Although several men said that their attitudes about the law have since changed and that they have since become more supportive, I wonder to what extent their prior misinformation about the law filtered into sports coverage. As sports journalism scholar Marie Hardin argues, “If sports editors believe this law (which aims at equity) has really been unfair to males, it follows that they would also assume that striving for equity in their sports news would also ‘hurt’ their men’s sports coverage.” In fact, Hardin’s observations apply here as, according to Sakamoto’s memories, some sports journalists worried that the increase in women’s sports would threaten and diminish men’s sports coverage. If such attitudes prevailed among sports journalists, then it is unsurprising that coverage did not keep pace with the progress of women’s sports in the society.30

Perhaps the most significantly pattern I observed in journalists memories is that many of them felt that Title IX contributed to the changes in opportunities for women in sport—and that these changes subsequently brought about more coverage—but none of them thought that Title IX led to major changes in newsroom practices. These reflections
offer a partial (and incomplete) explanation of why the social transformations of the 1970s did not lead to respective representation of women on the sports pages. I am speculating that scholars, who assume that the increase in women’s participation in sport would lead to more and better coverage also assume that these changes would disrupt masculinist journalistic norms that perpetuate gender-based hierarchies. Although sports journalists who worked at Chicago newspapers, especially those with a heavy focus on high school sports (e.g., *Daily Herald* and *Daily News*), affirmed the connection between growth in girls’ and women’s teams and expansion in coverage, they offered little indication that sports newsrooms suddenly stopped privileging men’s and boys’ sports and thereby stop to marginalize women and girls.

Journalists’ memories of Title IX call for the question whether scholars ought to consider a different “starting point” against which to measure changes in media coverage. In other words, rather than wondering why media coverage of women’s sports has not changed since the implementation of Title IX, despite the changes in women’s sports, a better question may be what are the structural, cultural, and institutional forces that shaped women’s sports coverage during this time. Title IX, undoubtedly, played a role, but scholars may be overestimating the extent to which Title IX *should have* changed cultural norms in sports newsrooms and women’s sports coverage.

That said, nationwide legislative changes which occurred in the early 1970s, eventually, awakened sports newsrooms regarding one aspect of gender-based diversity: the lack of women in sports newsrooms. In this chapter, I focused on men’s experiences because none of the papers I included in my analysis employed a woman on staff well into the 1970s. When women did enter the newsroom, they exposed the normative values
that governed sports departments and sports coverage. As I illustrate in the next chapter, women sport journalists expressed vastly different experiences with sports participation, sports journalism, and women’s sports coverage. The very culture and its standards that felt so natural to men appeared questionable at best and even nonsensical to the women. Women’s presence in itself disrupted dominant gender norms; their memories provide further possibilities in challenging the place of women on the sports pages.

Notes

3 Burstyn, The Rites of Men, 125.
5 Jaime Schultz, Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women’s Sport History (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2014). For a comprehensive history of girls’ and women’s basketball, see Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball (New York: The New Press, 2005), 51. For a detailed timeline on milestones in women’s sports, see Cahn and O’Reilly “Introduction.”
6 For the history of institutional changes in women’s collegiate athletics, see Schultz, Qualifying Times. Cahn, Coming on Strong, 257.

Myslenski interview.

Conklin interview. Taylor Bell, interview with the author, November 11, 2014, telephone.

Frisk interview. Frisk also referred to the fictionalized account about the Rockford Peaches appeared in the popular sports film, *A League of Their Own* (1992), starring Tom Hanks, Geena Davis and Madonna. The league was conceptualized by Philip K. Wrigley, owner of the Chicago Cubs, in order to keep the sport alive while the men are away at war. Eventually the league expanded to other cities in the Midwest, reaching ten cities and drawing close to one million fans in ten seasons. See Cahn, *Coming on Strong*.


For the history of the AAGBL, see Cahn, *Coming on Strong*. For the history of women’s basketball in the US, see Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass*.

Girls and boys participated in nine summer sport events: tennis, softball, 50-yard dash, standing broad jump, tetherball, jump rope, four square, box hockey and small fry. But this occurred only once a year and only for youngsters in primary education. Girls also participated in swimming through YMCA and the *Herald* regularly published articles on the scores, often accompanied with photos. In 1969, Paul Logan, for instance, equated the exclusion of girls from sports participation to not inviting girls to a party. He wrote, “Just 18 girls and over 700 boys at a party would be pretty frustrating for the guys. They’d be participating in the social event, but for most of them, it wouldn’t be a completely happy arrangement.” It would not be a happy arrangement, Logan continued, because girls could not dance will all the boys, and besides “how about the girls who weren’t invited to the party?” The party that Logan referred to was high school sports, where girls were limited to participation in cheerleading. In 1969, Forest View High School held 700 spots in sports for 1,130 boys, but only 18 for 1,100 girls. To expand opportunities for girls, the school invested in a pep team, opening up 200 spots for the girls who are interested in participating. Logan argued for a wider variety of sports for girls. Paul Logan, “Pep Squads—Girls’ Tie,” *Daily Herald*, March 25, 1969, Sec. 2, 1.


Frisk interview.


Bell interview.

Sakamoto interview. Skip Myslenski, Sakamoto’s colleague at the *Tribune* at that time, vividly sarcastically remarked that athletic directors thought Title IX “was going to ruin college athletics as we know it.” Myslenski interview.

The *Tribune* covered debates about Title IX. These articles foregrounded athletic directors’ and men’s sports coaches’ concerns. For examples of this coverage, see Bill Jauss, “Title IX Offers

26 Conklin interview. Blaming Title IX for cuts in men’s sports got the point that in 2008 the late Myles Brand, NCAA President, called institutions out to stop this practice and instead re-consider how they spend money. Brand demanded in an interview “My expectation is that over the next year or two we are going to see more [cuts of men’s teams] and so I’m trying, frankly, to preempt the argument against Title IX, unfair argument, I believe, and dissuade universities from going public with this approach.” See Erik Brady, “NCAA’s Brand: Don’t Fault Title IX for Future Cuts,” *USA Today*, 20 November 2008, accessed 5 December 2012, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/college/2008-11-20-brand-dont-blame-title-ix_N.htm?csp=34](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/college/2008-11-20-brand-dont-blame-title-ix_N.htm?csp=34)

27 I address these structural factors in Chapter 3.

28 Messner, “Boyhood, Organized Sports, and the Construction of Masculinities,” 423, 426. The men’s interpretations of these memories are consistent with the widespread argument in adolescent development literature according to which family setting, especially parents, strongly influence children’s gender role development. More specifically, home economics and family ecology scholar Susan Witt argued that children who grow up with “androgynous parents,” such as the journalists’ who grew up in an egalitarian household (e.g., Myslenski) or those whose mothers worked and/or went to college (e.g., Conklin and Bell) are likely to develop a more egalitarian and less stereotypical attitude toward regarding gender roles. Although the journalists did not recognize sport participation and sport fandom as a masculine activity (in other words, they did not recognize the process of socialization into sport as gendered), they did recognize disruptive gender roles and girls’ and women’s disruptions of the all-male sports domain as gendered. For these select few journalists, childhood memories of moments when women disrupted traditional gender roles mattered in their later attitudes as sports journalists. Susan D. Witt, “Parental Influence on Children’s Socialization to Gender Roles,” *Adolescence* 32, no. 126 (Summer 1994): 253-260.


30 Hardin, “Stopped at the Gate,” 73.
Chapter 4
Caught up in the Times: Women in Sports Newsrooms

In a historical overview on women’s status on sports journalism, sports media scholar Pamela Creedon observed that amidst the federal legislative changes in the 1970s “doors were ‘magically’ opening for women in sports reporting.” National newspapers, including the Washington Post, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Boston Globe, and local newspapers, such as the Milwaukee Journal, the Detroit News, and the Patriot News, alike began to hire woman on the sports staff. The women’s movement and the civil rights movement, which swept the nation in the 1960s, resulted in legislations including the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These Acts stirred up workplaces in the US by exposing and prohibiting sex-based discriminations in employment. Newspapers were no exception. In perhaps the most robust lawsuit of the time, seven women sued The New York Times on behalf of 550 female employees over sex discrimination in hiring, pay, and promotion. In 1978, four years after the women filed the lawsuit, the Times settled, implementing an affirmative action program that would advance women’s status at the paper. According to journalist Patricia Sullivan writing for the Women’s Media Center, the Times lawsuit, though neither the first nor the last legal complaint, carried cultural significance because the paper “sets the news agenda for countless other news organizations.” Legal protection and subsequent lawsuits mobilized a wave of women’s hiring in the newspaper business
and this wave slowly reached sports departments. Editors recognized that the sports department, a heavily male-dominated field with few and in certain places zero women, was a potentially weak link in the quest for providing equal employment opportunities. To open doors for women, newspapers did not perform magic. Fearing punitive consequences, newspapers wanted to avoid lawsuits.¹

In the 1960s and the 1970s, Chicago-area papers employed primarily men in the sports department. According to sports journalists’ memories, the Chicago Tribune, the Suburban Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times, and the Arlington Heights Daily Herald did not hire women into the sports departments well into the 1970s—in fact, some did not hire a woman to work full time until the 1990s. Although historical accounts on women’s status in sports journalism suggest that women had been writing about sports since the 1800s, the time when newspapers established sports reporting as a regular feature, sports journalists considered the women I talked to as “firsts” in their sports departments. This means that Chicago-area newspapers, unlike other papers in the US, either had never employed a woman on the sports staff or did so in the generations that preceded those whom the papers hired in the 1970s.²

By the mid-1970s, decision makers at Chicago newspapers’ sports departments set out to hire women often with the vision that women would cover the increasingly popular women’s sports. In this chapter I focus on four women who worked in sports journalism in Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s. All of them covered women’s sports extensively though not exclusively. In 1975, the Suburban Tribune brought Susan Sternberg to the sports department and added Jody Homer a few years later. The Chicago Tribune fell behind other national newspapers until the paper finally hired Marla Krause
as copy editor and Linda Kay as a reporter in 1978. These women’s stories provide an insight into women’s position in society in relation to sport and to sports journalism, exposing the gendered norms embedded in hiring practices, newsroom dynamics and assignment delegation.³

**Historical Context**

In an essay on women in national pastimes, sport historians Jaime Schultz and Andrew Linden recognize that “activities central to Americans’ identity formation, those that generate the most money and attention—in, short those that Americans consider national pastimes—are primarily about men’s participatory experiences.” As illustrated in the previous chapter, women did participate in sport but with notable limitations. To account for women’s role as consumers (of men’s sport) in the mobilization and maintenance of national pastimes, Schultz and Linden expand frameworks of analysis to recognize “women’s involvement in national pastimes, rather than their participation.”⁴

Women’s involvement provides a much more useful starting point for understanding women’s role in sport than merely focusing on participation. Unlike the men, for whom sport has constituted an integral site for socialization, few women participated in organized athletic endeavors. In 1970, high schools provided athletic opportunities for about 300,000 girls in the US, while colleges sponsored on average 2.5 women’s teams, limiting girls’ and women’s participation to a select number of sports such as field hockey and tennis, and activities such as cheerleading. That said, women turned out at men’s sporting events. With the emergence of television, league owners
developed specific marketing strategies to draw women consumers, which appealed to women’s role in the family and to their ‘feminine’ attributes. Baseball teams, including for example the Chicago Cubs, hosted what became known as “ladies’ days,” which allowed women to attend the games for free. The purpose of ladies’ days changed over time from intending to draw female spectators and developing a family-friendly environment to, as Schultz and Linden put, “gratifying male fans who could look forward to finding scantily clad women as part of the sportainment package.” In either case, including women as consumers of sport (attendance and mediated consumption) in historical accounts provides a more comprehensive view of women’s role in relation to sport.5

Women entered the male-only sport environment in one other capacity: As journalists. Few scholars have documented the emergence of women in sports journalism, but these accounts point to historical precedents for understanding female sports journalists’ status in the 1970s and 1980s. Women covered sports—such as prize fighting, baseball, and wrestling—as early as the 1890s. They also served as “stunt girls,” which entailed performing athletic stunts and then writing about these for the newspaper. Identifying them as “pioneers of what has come to be known as participatory sports journalism,” media scholar Pamela Creedon explained the significance of “stunt girls” as follows,

Although their exploits were not covered on the sports pages of their day, the stunts were important to the history of women in sports journalism because they were stories by women reporters about women accomplishing tasks involving physical strength and some athletic ability. As such, they also provided the reading public with an alternative vision to the feminine mystique of passivity and frailty.
At the turn of the 20th century women may not have written for the sports section, but they did start writing about sports.6

Historically, women brought an “alternative vision” to newspapers in several other ways, notably by presenting a “women’s angle” to men’s sports and by covering women’s sports. In 1920, women earned the right to vote. The tensions around women’s role in the society manifested in the way women covered sports. For example, Jane Dixon, who covered boxing extensively for the New York Telegram, saw women’s attendance at men’s sports, according to journalism historian Dave Kaszuba, “as both their right (a feminist view) and as a vehicle by which they could share their husbands’ interest and strengthen their marriage and home (a feminine view).” Her stories emphasized human elements and personal relationships. Kaszuba writes that, as a woman, Dixon “was being steered to write features to satisfy the supposed interests of women, which was a strategy that newspapers of the period adopted as a means of increasing female readership.” Editors assumed that a woman writer would bring an inherently distinct perspective to the sports pages.7

During this time women furthered efforts to better organize athletic participation. As a result, the sports pages began to incorporate stories about women’s sports. Creedon documents at least five women who wrote regularly about women’s sports in the 1920s. This included Margaret Goss at the New York Herald Tribune, who might have been, according to Kaszuba, “the first American female journalist to cover women’s sports for a daily newspaper.” Her column “Women in Sport” “provided Goss a forum to champion female athletics at a time when society had not yet fully embraced athletic competition
among women.” It is unclear from historical accounts whether other papers had a similar column dedicated only to women’s sports, but as women joined newspaper staffs in subsequent decades they wrote both about men’s and women’s sports.  

The 1970s brought about major changes in the sports journalism industry and so did the status of women sports journalist change. In the early 1970s, virtually all major newspapers in the country hired their “first” woman sports reporter. Many of these women columnists for professional men’s teams. Creedon’s *Women, Media, and Sport* documents these milestones in much detail and popular texts, such as ESPN’s documentary *Let Them Wear Towels*, provides further insight into the barriers women faced in the sports journalism industry.  

Most relevant to this study, however, is media scholar Judith Cramer’s “Conversations with Women Sports Journalists” chapter for which she interviewed women about the profession. In recalling their experiences from the 1970s and the 1980s, several women said that they did not initially plan on going into sports journalism; they just happened to slip into it. Once at the job, they enjoyed it. Women responded in a variety of ways to the question of whether an increase in women sports journalists would change coverage. While some said that women brought a “humanistic perspective” or a more “emotional” take to coverage, others disagreed and viewed their work the same as men’s (read: gender-neutral). In relation to women’s coverage, Cramer concluded based on the interviews that “because women’s sports on the whole receive the least amount of coverage, being deemed not very newsworthy, having a women’s sports beat carries almost no weight for professional advancement.” When women get stuck with women’s sports, their career stagnates. Further, women’s sports may be more difficult to cover due
to their general lack of publicity. As such, reporters have to put in extra effort in order to find more about female athletes and develop relationships with sources. ¹⁰

In this chapter, I take a deeper look into gendered newsroom dynamics from the perspective of women who worked for Chicago’s newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s. Women’s memories reflect many of the previously observed historical trends and provide further insight into gender-based assumptions about the role of women in relation to coverage of women’s sport.

“Girls Didn’t Do That”: Women in Sport and Sports Journalism

Women who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s developed a complex relationship to sport. Unlike the men, most of whom had a similar road to sports journalism—one that started with attending professional men’s events as children, continued with participating in sports, and then developed into choosing sports journalism for a lack of a better career in sport—the women told a different story about their entries into the profession. Few participated in sport growing up and only one of the women remembered having a strong desire to succeed in athletics as a youngster. The Chicago-native sports journalists developed a strong connection to Chicago’s men’s professional teams, but considering the virtually non-existent athletic opportunities, they did not mention ever aspiring to become professional athletes. For most women a career in sports journalism happened by circumstance. They all had some experience covering sports either in high school or in college. Sports editors valued those few but significant sports stories in the women’s resume and brought them on board.
In light of the limited opportunities for women’s participation in sport, three of the four sports journalists did not play sports growing up. “I didn’t play any sports because girls did not play sports,” Marla Krause began. Krause grew up in Chicago’s West side in a “very Jewish neighborhood,” and later moved with her family to the North side. In high school she played some basketball, the half-court version, but her school did not sponsor volleyball or gymnastics. “[We had] cheerleading of course,” Krause continued. “Then there was like a synchronized swim team which was, you know, you wouldn’t be caught dead doing that in high school.” Jody Homer’s three brothers all played sports, but she accepted her place on the sidelines. “I don’t think I had any sense of ‘this is not fair,’” Homer explained. “I look back now and think it was unfair. But it was just the way it was. You know, the girls didn’t do that.” Linda Kay, who was born in New Jersey, likewise did not have any desire to play sports as a child. “I had to do my stint in field hockey like everybody,” Kay recalled. “But, you know, I hated it.” These women did not find sports participation appealing when growing up. The idea that “girls did not play sports,” which normalized girls’ exclusion, coupled with the limited and gender-stereotypical opportunities distanced women from sports participation during their youth.11

Contrary to the other sports journalists, Susan Sternberg identified as an athlete and expressed displeasure with the lack of opportunities for girls during her childhood. Sternberg used to play catch with her little brother, but did not find the activity quite satisfactory. She wanted to win. Sternberg attended Waukeegan High School, located in the suburbs of Chicago, where the only opportunity to play would have been in the Girls Athletic Association events, which “just really seemed lame” to Sternberg. But once she
arrived to the University of Illinois to pursue her undergraduate degree, Sternberg immediately joined the volleyball and softball teams. At the time, Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), an organization which eventually folded when the NCAA took over the sponsorship of women’s events, sponsored intercollegiate athletics for women. Although Sternberg decided not to try out for the teams in her sophomore year because she wanted to dedicate more time to writing for the school newspaper, the *Daily Illini*, she continued to participate in intramural sports and stayed on the volleyball team as a manager. “I knew my future was in writing about sports, not playing them,” Sternberg explained. “But I did play. When I was at U of I, I played almost every intramural sport because I wanted to win a championship.” Ultimately, she achieved her goal. As a senior, Sternberg won a championship with her intramural softball team. Her athletic past did not correspond with the sporting experiences of the other women as she, similar to the men, moved into sports journalism from playing sports.  

Although sporting spaces excluded women from participation, sports journalists who grew up in Chicago felt close to the city’s sports teams. Attending professional men’s events in the Sternberg, Homer and Krause households was a family tradition. Sternberg’s mother would take her and her three siblings to the Chicago Cubs games in Wrigley field on Ladies’ Day, while her father, who worked during the day, would bring the children to White Sox night games at Comiskey Park. Sternberg also remembered going to hockey, football and basketball games on occasion. Her father was “a big sports fan.” Homer’s father, likewise, took her and her brothers to games. She grew up as a Cubs fan. Krause did not have any siblings, which she believes contributed to her passion
for sports. “I’m an only child, which was something that I think led to my interest in
sports,” Krause explained. “My dad was a huge, huge sports fan. He didn’t have a son to
watch TV with or to take to ball games. So there was me.” Krause remembered watching
one game on TV, while listening to another one on the radio. The sports journalists who
grew up in Chicago connected to the professional teams, often through their fathers.13

Women’s aspirations to become a sports journalist ranged from complete
disinterest in journalism altogether, general interest in journalism, and specific interest in
sports journalism. All of them, regardless of their initial career goals, wrote stories about
sports early in their careers and these stories eventually brought them to sports
departments. For instance, Jody Homer “never intended to become a journalist;” she
dreamed of becoming a school teacher. But upon her professor’s request, she submitted a
couple of articles she wrote in her journalism class to the St. Louis Post Dispatch. In one
of the articles, she wrote about an intramural softball team. “The was a sorority I didn’t
belong to but they were looking for extra players and wow I can play sports,” Homer
recalled. “I was terrible but I kind of liked it and [the article] was about this horrible team
we were on that lost and how bad I was. But it was funny and so they printed it.” To this
day Homer does not understand how that article got into the paper, but it certainly gave
her the qualifications to later write about sports. Without a job in teaching, Homer moved
to Florida after graduation and started working at a small paper where she gathered
experience in interviewing by writing a “Cook of the Week” column. When a colleague
from the sports department went on vacation, the editor asked Homer to cover sports for
that week. Although the colleague eventually came back, she stayed in the sports
department. “The sports editor said ‘you can do this,’” Homer remembered. “I mean no
one was more shocked than I was. I was suddenly a sports writer without any idea what I was doing. And for most of my career I think I felt like that.” Homer might have felt as though she had no idea what she was doing, but she got hired at the Suburban Tribune and later at the Chicago Tribune for no other reason but to cover sports.¹⁴

Unlike Homer, Kay wanted to become a journalist but did not have a particular interest in sports journalism. She was neither an athlete nor a sports fan. Kay’s first experience with writing about sports occurred during her first journalistic task when she worked for the high school student newspaper where she assumed the position of the women’s sports editor. “In those days women’s sports consisted of tennis and field hockey and so I covered those two sports,” Kay explained. She could not have imagined that she would later become a prominent sports journalist at a major newspaper. “I definitely did not aspire to be a women’s sportswriter or even a sportswriter at that point. I just did it because it gave me a position on the paper and I wanted to rise higher.” Kay envisioned herself covering politics in Washington, DC. Her ambition was to become a political reporter. But after writing an investigative story on the incarceration of boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, an editor from the San Diego Evening Tribune asked her if she would consider joining his paper’s sports department. “I was thinking, oh my God, I covered that as a news story, not as a sports story,” Kay said as she recalled her surprise. “I said if I could be, you know, involved in sports the way I am involved in politics and be aggressive in reporting sports…I think that would be very interesting.” Thus began Kay’s career in sports journalism.¹⁵

Similar to Kay, Krause developed an early passion for journalism in high school. In high school, Krause remembered that her Advanced Placement (AP) English course
teacher wanted to bring the student newspaper back to life and named her students editors. “We got so interested in journalism,” Krause said enthusiastically as she recalled writing about protests of the Vietnam War. “I just couldn’t believe how exciting the newspaper was. And the thought that I could do this for a living…and we had all this fun every day and get paid for it just really appealed to me.” Despite her early exposure to sports with her father, Krause began writing about sports well after graduating from college. Her first exposure to sports reporting came at the Pioneer Press, a suburban weekly in the northern and western Chicago suburbs, owned by the Sun-Times. The sports department lacked the staff to cover all the games. In light of her passion for sports, Krause “offered to cover…a basketball game, a football game, whatever they needed”—a job she “really really liked.” A few years later, this experience in sports reporting helped the Chicago Tribune in deciding to hire her.¹⁶

Sternberg also held strong memories about sports and sports journalism. “I can remember reading the sports pages of the Chicago Sun-Times when I was a kid, so I think I always liked sports writing,” Sternberg said. When she got to the University of Illinois, she decided to write for the Daily Illini. With a background in sport participation, Sternberg relied on her knowledge about sport,

I knew I needed to write for the Daily Illini to have a better chance to get into the Journalism program. So I figured, I’d go into sports because that’s what I knew best. And it seemed like an absolute fit and it really was for me.

Sternberg became the first woman at the Daily Illini to have a sports column. She wrote about women’s sports because “that’s what women did.” As a volleyball manager, she was able to travel with the team and write about it for the paper. She had a positive
experience covering women’s sports. “At the Daily Illini, with it being a college newspaper, they want you,” Sternberg explained. “They want your ability and they want you to do what you want to do to the best of your ability. And so I was really encouraged by my sports editors.” Sternberg later carried her enthusiasm for women’s sports into her career at the Suburban Tribune. 17

These stories indicate that women’s path to sports journalism varied. Sports journalists developed distinct relationships to sport participation, fandom, and journalism. Only Sternberg played sports competitively. Interestingly, of all the women she spent the shortest amount of time in the sports journalism industry. Krause loved sports and continued to pursue her passion when she began working for the Tribune (although she rotated positions at the newspaper and eventually ending up at the news desk). Kay very deliberately distanced herself from the sport culture. Even when she wrote about sports, she considered those stories to be about politics, not about sports. Homer repeatedly asserted throughout our interview that for most of her career in sports journalism she felt out of place. Sports journalists’ memories suggest that women’s process of socialization into sport and sports journalism did not mirror that of the men (as indicated in Chapter 3). In fact, although all of the women wrote about sports—and specifically about women’s sports—even before their career launched, only one of them (Sternberg) seemed to have intended to specifically work in sports. The others, Kay, Krause, and Homer, covered sports upon the request of their editors. As I discuss in the next section, women remembered their gender identity as a salient factor from the process of hiring onward.
“In the Sea of Men”: Tokens Under the Magnifying Glass

Following the history of women in sports journalism, sports media scholar Pamela Creedon argued that “by the 1970s much of the pioneering groundwork for women interested in careers as newspaper sports journalists had been done.” While this statement may have been true at some newspapers where women covered sports as early as the 1930s and 1940s, it was not true for Chicago newspapers. Even if, due to the gap in institutional memory, women had worked in sports at Chicago papers, Susan Sternberg, Jody Homer, Marla Krause and Linda Kay had to re-do the pioneering work in their respective sports departments. According to sports journalists’ memories, the nationwide movement against gender-based discrimination mobilized a wave in hiring, especially at the Chicago Tribune. But the women, once hired, faced institutional norms—some of which eventually prompted them to leave the industry.\(^{18}\)

All four journalists I interviewed expressed a heightened awareness of being a woman beginning with the hiring process. In fact, Marla Krause, who applied for a job at the Chicago Tribune after working at two different papers, said that being a woman “was a real door opener” for her. Because the Tribune’s fell behind other national newspapers on workplace equality, Krause had a sense that the paper deliberately wanted to bring a woman to the sports department,

I’m not sure I would have gotten an interview at the Tribune with only, I had at that time, about five months of experience at a daily because the Tribune was pretty strict about, you know, about how you needed two three years of daily newspaper experience.
Upon hiring her, sports editor George Langford gave Krause an option to work as a reporter or to stay as editor. Krause picked the latter: “I wanted to be an editor because I liked having the power of, you know, making those decisions.” She oversaw all the copy editors, made decisions about layout, and enforced deadlines. “I felt like I had a lot of influence.” Thus, in 1978, the Tribune hired a woman but the woman chose to take a decision-making position behind the scenes. The next woman would have to do the pioneering work on the frontlines.19

Right around the time when Krause joined the Tribune, the sports department would hire the first woman reporter, Linda Kay. In 1978, the twenty-seven-year-old Kay decided to leave her paper in San Diego to test her strengths. The Tribune jumped on the opportunity to interview her for a job in the sports department. “During the interview I said to the sports editor, ‘so how many women do you have working in this department?’” Kay remembered. “And he said, ‘you’d be the first’. And I said, ‘no, no, not again, please!’” She was once again, as she described, “a woman alone in a sea of men.” The Tribune’ leadership, based on Kay’s memories, made a deliberate choice to hire a woman sports reporter. Although Kay did not explain why the editors wanted to hire women, she attributed her decision to enter into sports journalism to them. These editors appeared to have pushed women into writing about sports even when the women did not necessarily think their work belonged to the sports realm.20

In Hinsdale, Illinois, at the Tribune Company’s Suburban Tribune bureau, women had already taken their place in the sports newsroom. In 1975, Susan Sternberg became the first woman in the sports department of approximately a dozen of sports journalists. As the only woman, Sternberg felt a heightened awareness about her skills. She perceived
that her colleagues viewed her as a representative of her social group. “I was the first woman hired in the sports department,” Sternberg remembered. “I felt like if I didn’t do a good job that they might never hire another woman…I was kind of a guinea pig, you know.” Later in the 1970s, the Suburban Tribune hired Jody Homer and Linda Young. Sternberg felt relieved, “They hired two more women after me, so I guess I did okay.” By that time, Sternberg guessed that attitudes toward women in the newsroom changed, “I could be wrong, but I’m kind of thinking that by the time they hired Linda Young…they looked her as a journalist and they didn’t look at her as a woman.” These three women stayed at the Suburban Tribune until shortly before the paper folded in 1984. While Sternberg quit, Homer and Young moved to the Tribune’s downtown bureau and stayed on throughout the 1980s.

At the Suburban Tribune four women in the newsroom amounted to approximately 30% of all reporters. At the Tribune, with a sports staff of about 70, women did not even meet the 10% threshold. According to the journalists, the Tribune hired another woman only after Homer and Kay left in the late 1980s. As such, women never reached a critical mass at the Tribune and remained of a token status in the sports department. Women sports journalist became symbols of their social category and, thus, faced higher levels of pressure to succeed. In order to fit into the male-dominated environment, women had to develop strategies for survival. Because their sex became salient as early as in the hiring process, women engaged in a constant negotiation of their minority status in relation to the male-as-norm culture of sports newsrooms.

The women I talked to felt under constant scrutiny to prove their knowledge of sports. Positioning men as natural “knowers” of sport and women as outsiders, the sports
newsroom culture privileged men’s perceived authority over women on the subject of sports. Thus, women needed to showcase that they knew sports *despite* their sex. Homer deconstructed the rationale rooted in patriarchal sports newsroom structures,

> When I would hear debates about women covering sports one of the things you would hear a lot that would make me nuts is, well, they never played so how could they possibly cover this? And that's so wrong. My husband [also a former sports reporter] never played football but he covered football. He never…I could list twenty sports that he never played but somehow he managed to cover it…Yeah, so that used to drive me crazy. It's not that complicated. And you don't have to play it to be able to write about it. People cover politics. They cover the President. They've never been the President but somehow they can write about the President even though they've never been the President. It, like, makes no sense.²³

Homer felt that women were held to higher expectations than men in order to prove their qualifications for the job.

To fit in women were expected to demonstrate a specific type of knowledge about sports: sports trivia and scorebook information. Kay joined the *Tribune* with prior experience at a San Diego paper with an established reputation, but she remembered that she had to jump through hoops when she first got hired as a sports reporter. “I really feel that to have authority as a woman you really ought to know [sports] … I came from a position where I didn’t have that background … I was an established reporter but I didn’t have that authority. And that was challenging.” She felt that women needed to demonstrate a specific type of knowledge base in order to gain authority in the sports newsrooms. At that time being a good journalist was not sufficient. Recalling her job interview with the San Diego paper, Kay said that it was a “big stretch for this editor to think that just because I covered a boxer that I was going to be a good sports writer.”
Even though the editors perceived women as qualified for the job, the women remembered facing resistance in the newsroom.  

I do want to point out that even though women expressed several issues that reflected the widespread exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination of women in sports newsrooms, all the women overall reported very positive experiences with their male colleagues. They “always felt welcomed,” “respected,” “part of a team,” saying that “the guys were so nice,” “so incredible,” and “amazingly kind.” I find recognizing women’s agency and sense of empowerment important in relation to addressing the consequences of tokenism. In moving forward, I address not the constraints that women faced due to their sex, but focus on role women’s social location played in sports reporting in general and in relation to women’s sports coverage in particular.  

**Women Journalist, Women’s Sports**

Women journalists and women sports coverage share a marginal status in the sports journalism industry, according to sports media scholars Marie Hardin and Stacie Shain, inasmuch as “both are not male, and such, are not valued within the sports/media complex because they do not and can never meet the masculine standards on which it is built.” In recognition of masculine newsroom cultures, feminist scholars hoped that the entrance of women into the sports journalism industry may aid the inclusion of women to the sports pages. This optimism derives from the premise that women, due to their social location and experiences, may be better situated to recognize the absence of women from coverage. Further, in recognizing the omission, women may challenge masculinist
journalistic standards that relegate women (as well as women journalists) to a second-class status. On the other hand, feminist scholars warned that, because of their minority statuses, women may—instead of challenging—reproduce masculinist norms in order to avoid further marginalization in the newsroom. This happens particularly in relation to covering women’s sports. In order to not feel pigeonholed, women may prefer to cover men’s sports. Further, because of the low-rank status of women’s sports beats, covering women may also prohibit career advancement opportunities. In other words, the relationship between women sports journalists and coverage of women’s sports has been highly complicated and inconclusive.²⁶

When opportunities for girls and women’s sports exploded in the 1970s, newspapers—particularly the suburban papers—began to put effort into covering these events. In order to adhere to this need, editors decided that hiring a woman to cover women’s sports would be the most logical step. “The majority of women…covered women’s sports,” Sternberg, who initially covered exclusively women’s sports at the Suburban Tribune, said. “It’s just like women being advice columnists and fashion writers. You know, they [editors] probably figured that [covering women’s sports] was playing to their [women’s] strengths.” Based on Sternberg’s recollection, it seems that editors feminized the women’s sports beat.²⁷

The women who worked in sports journalism during this time period viewed some assignments as the norm. When I asked Homer whether she felt constrained covering girls’ sports for the Suburban Tribune, she responded, “That wouldn’t have even occurred to us. It was all so new and the mindset was different…I thought, at the time, that this is great that girls are getting to play sports and this is great that girls are
actually getting their names in the paper.” Covering girls’ sports, Homer said, “was just the first of many steps that had to take place” for women journalists to advance in their career. She said she was always glad to be covering girls’ sports and did not object to this model.28

But Linda Kay, who joined the *Chicago Tribune* a couple of years later, questioned the gendered logic of assignment delegation. As the only woman reporter at the time, she found herself in a dilemma: She cared about women’s sports and wanted to see more coverage, but she did not want to be constrained. “I didn’t think I would be taken seriously,” Kay said as she reflected upon her thought process at the time. Covering women’s sports, with the exception of prep sports and international competition, was considered a punishment. “It was like covering soccer,” Kay said with a laugh, or obituaries. “Long ago when you did something wrong, they would put you on the obit page. You’re writing obits today.” With several years of experience behind her, Kay felt that covering only women’s sports would have been detrimental to her career. “I would have been ghettoized…I was at the stage in my career also where, for me, at that point [covering women’s sports] would have been a step backwards.”29 The sports journalists and editors I talked to, across the board, recognized that girls’ and women’s sports were a low-rung beat in that time period. The women felt the hierarchy as editors expected them to take these beats. Some, such as Sternberg and Homer, accepted this progression of assignments, while others, such as Kay, sought to challenge it. Hiring processes and the hierarchical categorization of assignments based on gender influenced the way women perceived their role in relation to women’s sports.
Inclusion of Women: Divergent Strategies

The women’s general approach to sports journalism greatly influenced their approach to covering women’s sports. In this sense, the four women’s priorities diverged in significant ways. Susan Sternberg remembered that she had two agendas: To excel at covering women’s sports and to equalize coverage. Sternberg, who played sports in college and covered women’s sports for the school newspaper, said,

There were plenty of writers to cover the guys’ sports, but I just kind of figured that if you could make that your niche, women’s sports, that kind of gives you a leg up…and you get to know these girls and the coaches better and maybe get them better coverage.30

She invested in building trust with the coaches and players in the area in order to provide high quality coverage of girls’ and women’s sports.

But this task often proved difficult. The older female coaches of girls’ teams met the media attention with skepticism. The coaches experienced negative encounters with male journalists and opposed to media coverage. But Sternberg needed to get her job done and she kept going back to the coaches, assuring them that she would not misquote them or otherwise misrepresent them. Eventually, the “old-school coaches,” as she called them, would trust her. “They would see that this is your passion and you are trying to equalize the coverage,” Sternberg said. “The coverage was just so unequal.” To improve the coverage, Sternberg invested in her relationships with the coaches.31

Beyond establishing a positive connection with the local athletic communities, Sternberg also needed to bring her agenda forward to the decision-makers at her paper—namely, the sports editors. Sternberg advocated that more men should write about girls’
and women’s sports in order to equalize coverage. She did not think that having one or two reporters on the girls’ and women’s assignments sufficed. After a year or so working at the *Suburban Tribune*, Sternberg remembered going to the sports editor and saying “you know what, the guys can also cover girls’ sports so that there are more people covering girls’ sports, so that they can have more [coverage].” Justifying her frequent visits to the editor in which she said pushed for more attention upon girls’ and women’s sports, Sternberg explained “It didn’t need to be equal, but it did need to be much more than meager, which is what it was before I started.” Assigning men to women’s beats was a step that newspapers could take in order to better integrate girls’ and women’s sports.³²

Although Sternberg and Homer worked side by side, their personalities and approaches toward women’s sports coverage drastically differed. Describing herself as “shy and quiet” and “not an aggressive personality,” Homer said she felt “more comfortable covering the girls” than boys and men. Answering the question of whether she had the opportunity to cover boys’ and men’s sports, Homer remembered,

> When I had to cover those, you know, some boys’ basketball games or football games, I think the coaches were…now that I think about this…the coaches were more ‘What is she doing here?’ And it’s not that they wouldn’t…I can’t ever remember somebody saying ‘I’m not talking to you.’ But the question might have been answered more briefly and then they’d turn to the guy reporter and talk to him.

She felt that boys’ and men’s coaches and athletes would not take her seriously because she “didn’t know a whole hell of a lot about sports.” Coaches of girls’ teams, both men and women, on the other hand seemed “glad to see [her].” Homer preferred covering girls’ and women’s sports because remembered feeling more comfortable.³³
Unlike Sternberg, Homer did not overtly advocate for girls’ and women’s sports coverage. She worked quietly, often covering stories that would not have gotten much attention. As someone who did not feel quite comfortable covering sports, Homer found great challenge in coming up with ideas. When she did not have a beat, she would look for stories with an “interesting angle” that are “a little bit different.” This approach led her to women who participated in sports that did not otherwise get much attention. Homer did not quote famous athletes, nor did she receive a glamorous placement on the sports pages, but she did bring visibility to women of different ages, abilities, and backgrounds who engaged in sports. Whether writing about a beep baseball for the visually impaired, a 42-year old mother who runs marathons or a newly formed advocacy organization for women in sports, Homer incorporated women who participated in sport outside of the mainstream sports culture.³⁴

Kay resisted ghettoization into coverage of women’s sports, but she insisted on emphasizing women’s role in her stories about men’s sports. Her goal was to bring out women who served in capacities other than as athletes. Kay’s stories attended to women as wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters and daughters. According to Kay, these women played an integral role in male athletes’ lives, “[The women] were involved in the life of this person and they had lives too, and they were interesting women.” Some of the women, Kay remembered, raised money for charity or had children with disabilities. Allowing her to bring a human element into sports stories, the women enabled Kay to get closer to the athletes themselves. “It was beneficial for me as a journalist and it also made my work easier,” Kay admitted. Spending time with the women involved in the life of the male athlete helped her better understand the athlete.³⁵
The mission to de-jargonize sports writing drove Kay’s work. Including women’s voices into sports stories, she said, was a part of her larger agenda to draw women readers closer to sports. Instead of breaking down plays, she focused on athletes’ personal side. “I was trying to simplify the world of sports in a sense,” Kay said. “Deconstruct that jargon...Grasp the human angle even, you know, with an issue-oriented piece. Make sure that there were people in it.” With this type of coverage, Kay felt, she could “reach out to women readers.” Resisting (male) sports reporters’ and the sports department’s obsession with trivia, statistics, and play-by-play, Kay challenged the journalistic norms that, she felt, excluded and distanced women from sport. This way of reporting has historically been associated with a more humanistic style, often referred to as the “woman’s angle” to sports journalism.36

While women on the frontlines worked toward including women’s voices onto the sports pages, Marla Krause remembered advocating for a recognition of female athletes and women’s sports behind the scenes. Krause recalled a situation that occurred in a meeting regarding an award given out annually to a high school boys’ basketball player with a sense of pride. The award, called Illinois Mr. Basketball, started in 1981. Local media, including, significantly, the Tribune cast their vote. Krause remembered sitting in a meeting and feeling flustered about the lack of a girls’ equivalent of that award,

I said, why don’t we do a Ms. Basketball? And everybody in the room just turned around and stared at me because nobody had thought about it. This was the time when girls’ basketball was really, you know, building up steam...I always feel really good every time I see that Ms. Basketball award. I feel like, yes, you know, that I was the person in the room who said why aren’t we doing this. And, you know, it’s not like they were bad people...It just never was on anybody’s radar screen that you would do for girls what you were doing for boys.37
When the Ms. Basketball award launched, Krause already left the sports department, but her presence in the room brought women into her colleagues’ purview.

Sports journalists’ memories provide an account a variety of approaches to writing about sports. When reflecting upon their careers, the four women identified distinct moments when they became aware of women’s marginalized status in sport. Equipped with this consciousness, the women remembered pushing for more coverage of girls’ and women’s sports, writing about leagues that would otherwise remain invisible, centering the voices of women who played integral roles in male athletes’ lives, and advocating for a recognition of women’s accomplishments. These stories illustrate that strategies to include women in sports could manifest in a number of ways, all of which question the decision-making processes and content-outcomes in sports journalism.

**Connections to Feminism**

Sports media historian Pamela Creedon’s assertion that women had done much of the pioneering work in sports journalism by the 1970s begs a logical question of whether the women, the “firsts” in Chicago’s newsrooms, considered themselves pioneers and, further, how they saw themselves in relation to the broader feminist movement—the movement that led to these important breakthroughs. Although at the time the women did not recognize that their contributions would further the status of women in sports journalism and in sports coverage, in retelling their contributions in our interviews, the women took pride in the outcomes. Looking back upon their careers, they endorsed many of the agendas of the feminist movement and identified their own work as advocacy.
In response to the question of how she saw her role as a sports journalist, Sternberg replied,

You know, I didn’t see myself as a pioneer, which you might think that I would. But I didn’t. I didn’t see myself as a pioneer. Like I said, I did feel a little pressure thinking if I don’t work out, will they hire another woman? I mean, is that an issue? But I saw myself as a writer who wanted to outscoop the competition on my beat, which would be high school sports.

Explaining her motivations, Sternberg continued “I did want to equalize the Trib’s high school coverage because I knew the girls deserved it. I mean more girls might want to play sports if they read about girls playing sports. I really, I fought for the coverage.” The revolutionary environment of the 1970s inspired Sternberg to commit to change. “It seemed really important for me, just pushing that agenda back then. Now I push different agendas because times have changed.” Reflecting on her career, Sternberg said “You know, that was a good time and I look back on it fondly and think, wow, that was me in the ‘70s being like so many people in the ‘70s, just passionate about something and wanting something to change, wanting to help change happen.” At that time, making change happen in sports journalism entailed advancing the status of women.38

The environment shaped the way sports journalists thought about their role as one of the few women in sports journalism. Homer reflected upon the experience as follows,

At the time, I just did it. In so many situations I was the only woman there. And I think I did… I was never a great writer. I was an okay writer. I did enough to do the job, but you know just by sticking with it I think people got used to seeing women around and, you know, I got more than one ‘nice story’ from coaches.

Homer did not “set out” to become a pioneer, but she embraced the position. “I didn’t say ‘hey I’m going to be an advocate for women’s sports,’ but I just got caught up in the
times,” Homer said. When I asked her if she considered herself a feminist, Homer responded “I was not politically active. But, yes, if you’d have asked me then or now if I was a feminist, I would’ve said yes…The agenda was my agenda, but I wasn’t out marching.” Similarly, Linda Kay considered herself “without a doubt” an advocate of women’s sports. The paths of advocacy may have differed for the women, but their agendas coincided with those of the feminist movement.39

Working in an urban environment, one that developed into a central site for social change, might have contributed to the women’s connection to contemporary social issues. But the social change did not automatically influence newspapers—the women needed to become agents. Describing the Chicago Tribune as “insular,” Krause lamented on the newspaper’s response to the times. “A lot of people used to call it the glacial Tribune because change was so slow.” The Tribune maintained the perception, Krause said, that “we were the best in the city and we could kind of do whatever we wanted.” This environment, however, did not prevent the women from engaging with the women’s movement. “Absolutely. Oh, absolutely, [the women’s movement] was a big thing,” Krause said. “There was a kind of group of us at the Tribune that, you know, were always talking about issues and who was in what jobs and what man said what.”40 In this male-dominated environment, sports journalists found space to integrate the social issues of the time into their careers. Within the sports department, their work encompassed advocacy of women in sport. When remembering the social attitudes and institutional norms that obscured their presence in sport, the sports journalists recognized their own actions, however small, as important in furthering the status of women on the sports pages.
Conclusion

In her comprehensive chapter on the history of women in sports journalism, feminist sports media scholar Pamela Creedon writes “I welcome challenges to this list because the more one learns about history, the more one learns that it is never safe to say ‘first.’” This chapter furthers the learning process about a crucial time period for women in sports journalism. In the 1970s, when newspapers nationwide began hiring women into the sports departments, Chicago papers followed along—though they did so slowly.

Sports journalists’ memories challenge Creedon’s historical accounts about women in sports journalism by not only adding new “pioneers” to the list, but by nuancing the timeline of gaining acceptance. Creedon does include Linda Kay’s work at the Chicago Tribune among the stories of pioneering women, but this chapter, with a closer attention and more in-depth analysis of Chicago’s newspaper landscape, complicates linear narratives based on changes at major city papers. The non-mainstream papers, specifically the Suburban Tribune, with a local focus, provided a more inclusive space for women both in terms of numbers and in spaces for activism. This observation prompts me to wonder whether newspapers with better attention to interscholastic sports (which at that time necessarily began including girls) also maintained a more inclusive environment for women.41

That said, the Suburban Tribune’s environment might have been exceptional in the larger newspaper landscape in Chicago. Sports journalists placed the hiring of the “first” women into the Suburban Tribune and the Chicago Tribune sports departments in the late 1970s, but did not recall any women working full time for other papers (the Sun-
times and the Daily Herald) until the mid-1980s and the late 1990s. The complete absence of women from sports newsrooms at these papers challenges the narrative according to which the national wave of hiring women into the sports departments equally in the 1970s affected newspapers across the board. Based on Kay’s account that, as the first woman at two different papers she had to re-do the pioneering work, I wonder whether the women who entered the sports journalism industry later faced the same barriers as women in the 1970s.

The context of the 1970s is, nevertheless, crucial in interpreting these memories. Amidst the feminist movement, newspapers could not ignore the increasing number of teams and competition events for girls and women. Some sports journalists here did not set out specifically write about women’s sports or to even work in newspapers’ sports departments, but they capitalized upon early-career opportunities to write about women’s sports. These writings later prepared them for jobs at Chicago newspapers. Also during this time, women journalists nationwide began suing newspapers for sex-based discrimination. Although the sports journalists here gave no indication of lawsuits against their papers, one of the women speculated that the Chicago Tribune hired women in order to avoid lawsuits. The all-male sports department so overtly failed at meeting standards for workplace equality that the paper had to make an effort in hiring women at least to give an illusion of inclusion to protect itself. Based on sports journalists’ memories, the larger social changes seemed to have reached sports departments at least ideologically, though the changes occurred slowly.

To further situate this chapter within dominant narratives in scholarship about gender dynamics in sports, sports journalists’ memories support existing research in
which scholars argue that masculinist sports newsroom cultures marginalize women and
women’s knowledges. All the sports journalists I talked held at least a bachelor’s degree
in journalism, acquired experience in journalism and even wrote sports-related stories
prior to joining their respective papers; yet, they faced pressure to perform well and some
colleagues perceived them as unqualified. Notably, the women felt that they had to
establish credibility not only for themselves but for all women. Gender expectations
dictated that sports departments hire women in order to keep up with the increase of
women’s participation in sport. Sports editors, especially at the suburban paper, relegated
women’s sports to women. Not all women covered specifically women’s sports—in fact,
Kay explicitly distanced herself from that assumption. Yet, in many ways, the women’s
responses support sports media scholars Marie Hardin and Erin Whiteside’s assertion
that, in sports journalism, “a male-as-norm ethos is built into [the] processes and
organizational hierarchies.” Sports journalists’ memories are consistent with other
women sports journalists’ accounts of “tokenism”—a position of minority status whereby
women feel as representatives of a whole social group. The male-as-norm ethos
manifested in the subtle ways in which women remembered gender-hierarchies through
institutional norms and cultures.42

That said, the women spoke with a strong sense of agency, articulating myriad
ways in which they perceived their work as advocacy for women. These memories point
to the potential in pluralism toward the inclusion of women in sports. Based on
memories, it is impossible to determine the extent to which these strategies brought about
change in sports departments while the women worked there. I would argue that even
articulations of these strategies challenge both masculinist values associated with sports
coverage, questioning whose voices and whose stories belonged to the sports pages, and the very definition of sport. Although they held different views, in their recollections of the past the sports journalists expressed a sense of connection to the feminist movement and a commitment to advancing the status of women in sport media.

After focusing on the relationship between the nation-wide political, social, and legislative transformation in the first two chapters, I turn next to examining how industry factors mediated attitudes and efforts towards covering women’s sports. Neither the feminist movement, nor journalists’ commitment sufficed in challenging the systematic exclusion of women from the sports pages. Industry changes, and editors’ decisions in response, placed barriers—or alternatively enabled—the inclusion of some women’s sports, in some sections, on some pages, under some circumstances.

Notes


2 In a comprehensive chapter on women in sports journalism, Creedon provided a list of “firsts;” women who joined the New York Times, served as editors, wrote a women’s sports column, and so forth. Among these was Zelda Hines, who became bowling editor for the Chicago Defender. The list does not include any other women from Chicago-area papers. However, Based on this historical overview of women in sports journalism, it is unlikely that Chicago area newspapers did not ever have a woman on the sports staff. In fact, because scholars have thus far devoted little attention to women in sports journalism history, the historical account may, in this area, be incomplete. Further, staff turnover (and/or institutional sexism) may have resulted in an omission of women’s presence and contributions to the sports pages. These two factors may have led to inaccurate—or at least incomplete—institutional memory. Creedon, “Women in Toyland,” 75. For historical accounts on women who wrote about sports, see Dave Kaszuba documented the lives of women sports writers in the 1920s, see Dave Kaszuba, “Bringing Women to the Sports Pages: Margaret Gross and the 1920s,” American Journalism 23, no. 2 (2006): 13-44. Dave Kaszuba, “Ringside, Hearthside: Sports Scribe Jane Dixon Embodies Struggle of Jazz Age Women Caught Between Two Worlds,” Journalism History 53, no. 3 (2009): 141-150. For a historical account on women sports writers in the 1940s, see Dain TePoel, “Mary Garber’s


7 Kaszuba, “Ringside, Hearthside,” 144.


12 Susan Sternberg, interview with the author, June 20, 2014, telephone.


14 Homer interview.

15 Kay interview.

16 Krause interview.

17 Sternberg interview.


19 Krause worked first at the national foreign copy desk and then moved to the city copy desk. The *Tribune* trained the copy editors on deadlines and the *Tribune* style before assigning them to the sports department. Krause interview.

20 Kay interview.

21 I did not talk to Linda Young for the purposes of this dissertation because Young almost exclusively covered boys’ and men’s sports. Sternberg interview.

In a 1981 interview, Kay recalled her experiences when she started working at the San Diego paper’s sports department. “For the eight hours that I worked, the guys around me would constantly talk about [trivia] and I would always feel like ‘what am I doing here?’” Many of the men in sports journalism, including at the *Tribune*, identified as sports fans. Kay, however, did not feel she needed to know sports trivia. Echoing Homer’s logic, Kay said “you don’t have to be a doctor to cover the medical field. You don’t have to be a scientist to cover science. You have to be a really good researcher. You have to do your homework before you go out and cover any story.” By the time I interviewed Kay, she changed her mind and believed that women ought to know the knots-and-bolts of sports. Earlier in her career she questioned standards in sports journalism, but later she accepted them. Linda Kay, interview for the Northwestern Oral History Project, 1981, Evanston, Illinois.

Krause recalled that a few women held brief stints in the sports department after her, but immediately got out because they could not fit into the environment. Krause interview.

Sternberg, interview. Krause interview. Kay interview. The discrimination women faced based on their gender is consistent with those observed by feminist sports media scholars in other studies. See, Creedon “Women in Toyland” and studies by Marie Hardin.


Sternberg interview.

Homer interview.

Kay interview.

Sternberg interview.

Sternberg interview.

Homer interview.


Kay interview.

Kay interview.

Krause interview.

Sternberg interview. Bob Sakamoto, who worked alongside Sternberg and Homer at the *Suburban Tribune* described Sternberg as “the militant type feminist kind of girl.” She was, according to Sakamoto, “tougher” because she used to play sports. He described Homer as “more of a quiet meek kind of person.” Sakamoto’s descriptions of the two women closely resemble the ways in which women described themselves. Bob Sakamoto, interview with the author, May 23, 2014, Chicago, Illinois.

Homer interview. Kay interview.

Krause interview.

Creedon, “Women in Toyland,” 68. In my review of literature I found no record of Susan Sternberg, Jody Homer or Marla Krause. Although Sternberg and Homer’s absence may be explained by the fact that they worked for a smaller paper, the absence of Marla Krause from historical accounts of women in sports journalism raises concerns. I wonder whether historical
narratives only account for reporters in sports departments and exclude women in other, often decision-making, positions. In fact, in my attempt to identify women in sports journalism, I asked some of the Tribune reporters whether they remembered Krause and they responded by saying something like “yes, but she was at the copy desk” or “yes, but she wasn’t on the frontlines.” These responses call for a problematizing of whom scholars include in their inquiries about gender issues in sports journalism. The extensive focus on those whose byline appear on the sports pages may erase the struggles, efforts, and contributions of those who worked behind the scenes and perhaps even made important decisions regarding the very content that reporters produce and readers consume. For women’s sports, editors’ decisions may determine the length of the story, accompanying photos, and headlines. Considering that sports media scholars use all these elements as points of analysis upon which they make assertions regarding the status of women in sports media, copy editors’ labor and their experiences would significantly contribute to the field.

42 Hardin and Whiteside, “Token Responses to Gendered Newsrooms,” 643.
Chapter 5

Spaces of Visibility: Journalistic Norms, High School Sports and Recreation

In light of the increased athletic participation of girls and women and the (incomplete) wave of hiring women into newsrooms, sports pages ought to have followed suit in including girls and women. However, these changes did not miraculously challenge newsroom values and routines. Sports departments continued to prioritize around boys and men. Educational institutions added more opportunities for both girls/women and boys/men, but instead of incorporating these emerging sports city newspapers moved toward greater emphasis on a select few professional men’s sports. Amidst these rigid standards emerged few—yet that much more significant—spaces where female athletes would appear.¹

Within the sports pages, the high school sports section allowed for greater visibility of female athletes. In the 1960s, those who could afford (mainly white middle class families and in smaller percentage black middle class families) migrated from the central city area to the suburbs. The suburbanites developed a great sense of involvement in their local areas and felt overall more positively about their communities than central city residents. Readers’ migration to the suburbs mobilized two main forces in Chicago’s newspaper business. It prompted central city newspapers to adjust their content in order to retain subscribers who now lived outside of the city and it allowed smaller suburban papers to expand in size and circulation. Newspapers played an important role in informing the suburbanites about community life. Sports, especially youth sports at local
high schools, attracted readers. With the increase of opportunities for boys, and later girls in interscholastic competition, sports pages served a community building function. This coverage tended to be positive and, once girls competed in higher numbers, more inclusive. The growth in girls’ participation in sport overlapped with the growth of the suburbs and, thus, suburban papers. The increase in space dedicated to high school sports provided an opening for coverage of girls’ sports.

Outside of the sports pages, the recreation section and its variants emerged at this time and created space for female athletes. The recreation section consisted of sports coverage that highlighted a community league, a local sporting event, or an outstanding athlete from the area. These stories only appeared in the suburban inserts or in the particular fitness-related section—not in the sports section. This type of coverage both raised awareness about community events and attracted advertisers in a paradoxical cultural moment for women’s sports.

In this chapter, I focus on spaces in the newspaper that sports journalists remembered as more inclusive of girls’ and women than the sports section overall. These spaces, emerging out of the structural reorganization of Chicago’s newspaper landscape, adhered to standards that in certain ways differed from those of the sports section. Within this context, I examine how journalists, in their recollections of these spaces, articulated journalistic values and norms and to what extent did these values and norms reflect masculinist newsroom standards. In particular, I seek to answer the question of which selection criteria and processes journalists remembered shaping (constraining and/or enabling) the inclusion of girls’ and women’s sports.
This chapter, further, provides insight into the interaction between structural forces and journalists’ agency in relation to covering women’s sport. Sports journalists’ rationalizations on why girls’ and women’s sports did or did not receive coverage mirrored discursive strategies identified in other studies. In their research sports journalists’ choices to (not) cover women’s sports, feminist sports media scholars Annelies Knoppers and Agnes Elling observe that journalists view criteria for selection process (e.g., objectivity, interest, and tradition) gender neutral when in fact the application of these criteria “conceal issues of gender dynamics of power.” Explaining this problem further, they argue that “this strategy allows [journalist] to be misogynist and resistant to the coverage of women’s sport while simultaneously allowing them to claim neutrality and fairness for themselves.” The sports journalists I talked to cited structural forces (e.g., space availability, market forces, and reader interests) as both enabling and constraining women’s sports coverage. They also recognized themselves as social actors who could—and based on their memories and articles did—contribute to the visibility of girls’ and women’s sports. In their retelling of decision-making processes, journalists who worked in the Chicago market in the 1970s and 1980s point to a complicated relationship between structure and agency in relation to coverage of women’s sport.3

Historical Context

The journalism industry underwent a major change in the late 1960s and 1970s. Technological changes prompted a restructuring of newsrooms in several notable ways.
Newspapers began to “go electronic,” using new storage and editing systems. This “all
electronic editing system,” an article in Editor & Publisher in 1975 stated, was “one of
the largest undertakings in the newspaper industry.” Further, innovations in printing
technology allowed for the development of multiple zoned editions per day, whereby
newspapers could improve their suburban coverage. As this chapter illustrates, these
changes affected newsrooms in Chicago.4

In terms of content, television altered the ways in which newspapers reported on
sports news. Rather than regurgitating the games, which readers would have already seen,
newspapers, Robert McChesney writes, “began to provide more analysis, background
information, and statistical data that the other media found it difficult to provide.” The
greatest sportswriters, McChesney adds, “began to combine a critical intelligence with a
great love of sport.” Sports departments also began to place more emphasis on quotes
from players and coaches, which required that reporters cultivate sources on their
respective beats. Building relationships and gaining access to sources took much time,
effort, and resources particularly for staffers who covered multiple suburbs or several
schools across the city. For newspapers, local sports, and community leagues began to
serve as a way to attract readers.5

During this time, girls and women’s sports saw a nation-wide explosion. In 1971-
1972 school year, that is before Congress passed Title IX, less than 300,000 girls
participated in high school sports in the United States comparing to more than 3,600,000
boys. Within two decades, girls’ participation grew to nearly 2 million. Similar increase
happened on the collegiate level. In 1970, colleges sponsored an average of 2.5 varsity
teams. By 1988, that number grew to 7.31 teams per school on average. According to
Vivian Acosta and Linda Jean Carpenter’s comprehensive study on NCAA participation, by 1990, 96.2% of schools in all divisions offered basketball, more than 88% offered tennis and volleyball, 82.1% offered cross country, 70.9% offered softball and more than 60% offered track and field for women.\textsuperscript{6}

Nationwide trends reached Illinois too. In the mid-1970s, girls’ participation in interscholastic sports increased by around 27,000 annually. In 1972, the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) conducted state championships for girls only in track and field, tennis, and bowling. By 1978, that number increased to 12, including basketball, volleyball, and track and field with the highest number of participants. In 1974, only about 60 colleges in the US offered athletic scholarships for women. By 1978, that number grew to 500. These trends substantially changed the sporting landscape in the area as girls’ and women’s sports became an integral part of community life.\textsuperscript{7}

But the entrance of women into athletics did not go quite smoothly. The media met women’s gains with a framework that hardly furthered their progress. Changes in gender norms did not become incorporated into everyday discourses, rather they resulted in a cultural backlash, which manifested in the increased popularity of fitness. This movement toward “cosmetic exercise” brought about, according to sport historian Jaime Schultz, “a cultural recalibration that directed attention toward aesthetic fitness, and especially aerobic dance, at the expense of women’s athletics.” In the 1980s, Schultz writes, the culturally dominant conservative attitudes pushed against women’s athleticism and privileged fitness and aerobics, only within the constraints of “a culturally sanctioned standard of physical beauty.” Media outlets, including newspapers, capitalized upon this fitness craze and exploited it for advertising purposes. Though much of this coverage,
particularly that in magazines, sexualized and objectified women’s bodies, these fitness-oriented sections and recreation sections created space for women’s sports coverage.\textsuperscript{8}

In this chapter, I explore how Chicago newspapers responded to these technological and market forces and, specifically, how sports departments responded to the institutional and cultural changes in women’s sport.

Changing Newspaper Landscape

In the Chicago area, the growth of suburbs and movement of readers outside of the city changed the newspaper landscape by allowing for an emergence and expansion of suburban-focused papers for which coverage of high school sports served an important function. High school sports occupied a central place in the life of the newly founded communities, bringing its inhabitants together for local events, who then looked to read about their children and their school in the paper. In inner-city newspapers, high school sports coverage received less attention, but still capitalized upon various schools’ traditions of success and reported on Illinois state tournaments. Sports journalists at suburban (\textit{Arlington Heights Daily Herald} and \textit{Suburban Tribune}) and metropolitan papers (\textit{Chicago Daily News} and \textit{Chicago Sun-Times}) described standards of local prep sports coverage as overall supportive of (high school) athletes and more inclusive than other types of sports coverage (i.e., college, professional). With the primary goal to put names in the paper and bring athletes to life, sports journalists characterized the high school sports section as diverging—and often conflicting—from the sports departments’ general criteria for covering stories. Citing these standards, sports journalists asserted that
high school sports pages enhanced the visibility to girls’ sports. Although the role and importance of prep sports within the context of sports pages overall varied depending on the respective newspaper’s market (suburban vs. inner-city), sports journalists across newspaper types articulated consistent attitudes towards girls’ coverage.9

Standards of high school sports coverage played an important role at the Daily Herald. As former long-time editor Bob Frisk remembered that the paper’s leadership highly valued sports—especially high school sports. Frisk remembered that Bob Paddock, a grandson of the Herald founders, frequently attended high school sporting events (including Frisk’s very own track and field meet), and covered them. Not only did Paddock’s presence mean a lot to Frisk as a competitor, but it also showed him how much Paddock cared about high school sports. Shortly thereafter, Paddock hired the 16-year-old Frisk and named him sports editor by 1958. In that position, Frisk once again became convinced of Paddock’s commitment to high school sports. “Sports was huge in the paper,” Frisk recalled. “Sports was what this paper was known for. It’s always been what this paper has been known for.” Paddock, according to an article Frisk wrote in 1999, “convinced everyone that for this paper to succeed, local sports news was an absolutely vital part of the mix.” In 1999, reflecting upon forty-years as a sports editor at the paper, Frisk urged the readers, “I want you to look at this high school sports section today. You probably take this kind of coverage for granted.” He added, “The Daily Herald gives high school sports as much coverage as any newspaper in the country. Thank you, Bob Paddock.”10

During Frisk’s leadership, the Herald maintained a strong commitment to high school sports and this commitment eventually brought attention to girls’ sports. As
Howard Schlossberg, who worked on contract for the *Daily Herald*, explained, “Kids’ names in print sells newspapers, sells subscription, sells advertisement, sells classified ads” and “puts smiles on parents’ faces.” Journalist and editors who oversaw primarily prep sports described the overall approach as positive toward the athletes. At the *Herald*, Frisk said his goal was “to just make the local stories meaningful and to make them something people could really look forward to.” He added, “I did want to make the paper positive. Remember they’re kids.” Schlossberg, affirmed Frisk’s approach. “We’re not here to embarrass the kids.” These standards, sports journalists said, allowed the paper to become inclusive of girls in sports, who were in the 1970s gaining more and more opportunities to play.  

Sports journalists who worked for inner-city newspapers described standards of high school sport coverage similarly. Taylor Bell, who served as high school sports editor at the *Chicago Daily News* and (upon the folding of the *Daily News*) at the *Chicago Sun-Times* from 1968 for more than forty years, attributed this type of coverage to *Daily News* associate sports editor John Justin Smith. Smith, as Bell remembered, told his staff “I want you to make [high school athletes] walk and talk.” Previously, high school sports coverage consisted of scores and highlights, of “strictly nuts and bolts,” and not feature stories or human interest stories that readers in the 1970s saw. According to Bell, the *Daily News* gave “boys and girls high school athletes an identity in the media.” Bell later conveyed Smith’s approach to his writers. Steve Tucker, who covered high school sports for the *Sun-Times*, used the Bell’s exact words when he said “Taylor Bell told all of us at one time or another…when you are covering these young kids, when you write something, make them walk and talk. Bring them to life.” This overall approach to prep
coverage informed the ways in which editors and journalists thought about girls’ sports and their role in the community, as well.¹²

To better understand the motivations behind high school sports coverage, it is important to look at the conditions of the market in Chicago at the time. In the 1980s, the three dailies with the highest circulation numbers were the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Sun-Times* and the *Daily Herald*. In light of the decline in percentage of population reading newspapers, newspaper analysts worried that a city could not sustain audiences and advertisers to uphold two daily newspapers. But, as journalism scholar Jim Willis wrote in the 1980s, in cities like Chicago, newspapers successfully captured different markets, appealed to different audiences, published in different formats and emphasized different content. These “obvious differences,” Willis assessed, were “good for the readers as well as the newspapers because [they offer the readers] alternative newspapers while still keeping alive the fieriest of competition between the competing newspaper staffs.” Different foci, and competition between different staffs, structured the priorities in sports coverage for Chicago newspapers.¹³

The 1960s saw a nationwide migration of city-residents into the suburbs and Chicago was no exception. The *Chicago Tribune* worried about losing readers who no longer lived in the city. In 1967, in response to the migration, the *Tribune* launched a suburban insert the *Suburban Tribune* with operations in Hinsdale, Illinois. The *Suburban Tribune* would provide local news for particular suburban areas, but the readers had to buy the *Tribune* to get the *Suburban* insert. The target areas fell along the Burlington Train Line, particularly DuPage County, which was one of the fastest growing counties in the nation. The *Tribune* executives decided, according to deputy sports editor (who also
oversaw development) Owen Youngman, that “in order to not lose connection with people as they migrated from the city to DuPage, they needed to start covering municipal news and high school sports … with much more focus than they had done before.” The readership and model of the Suburban Tribune allowed for a greater emphasis on local, high school and college sports than the Tribune, thus complementing the city coverage. Youngman described the Suburban Tribune as “additive” to what the Tribune already did. “It was a segmentation of the market, before we ever used terms like that.”

The Suburban Tribune and the Daily Herald overlapped in few geographic areas and operated altogether differently. Suburban Tribune writers had to cover suburbs all around the city, while the Herald focused heavily on the Arlington Heights area. At one point, the Suburban Tribune covered eight areas, which meant that the journalists could not physically be there for all the games in the sport of their focus. Although the coverage was divided into different geographic areas, the writers were not. Rather, each writer covered a particular sport or several sports for all the suburbs within the Suburban Tribune’s reach. They would work the phones during the week, trying to maintain contacts with players and coaches. Writers for the Daily Herald, on the other hand, remained more familiar and more invested in a smaller number of schools in the northwest suburbs. Susan Sternberg, who worked for the Suburban Tribune in the early 1980s, said that competition with the Herald informed their reporting and foci. “So, if your newspaper is just covering Arlington Heights, for example, you really can get great coverage for Arlington Heights,” Sternberg explained. “Whereas what we had to do in that area [was to cover] Arlington Heights, Barrington, and Hoffman Estates, so we really
tried to have comprehensive coverage versus one specialized coverage.” This agenda carried the papers into the 1980s.\textsuperscript{15}

While the \textit{Suburban Tribune} and the \textit{Daily Herald} focused on the suburbs, the \textit{Daily News} and later the \textit{Sun-Times}’ high school sports staff covered the city schools. “We were covering 125 [schools] and trying to deal with as much as we could,” Bell recalled. “When I started in ’69, I remember Ray Sons [sports editor] telling me ‘every day, we want a high school story in the paper.’” When the \textit{Daily News} folded and the staff joined the \textit{Sun-Times}, high school sports coverage expanded. “We were doing four-five-six-seven pages on Sundays and the basketball on Saturdays, and [other] stories throughout the week.” The writers would call Bell every Sunday morning at 9am to get their assignments for the week. Bell assigned stories on a first-come-first-served basis. “For the most part, they covered everything,” Bell said, referring to the writers as the “swat squad.” The \textit{Suburban Tribune} and the \textit{Daily Herald} coverage did not appear to influence the \textit{Daily News/Sun-Times}—mainly because these papers had a different scope. Throughout the 1970s, the two papers focused on the suburbs, with the \textit{Herald}, at that time, remaining constrained to a few areas in the suburbs. The \textit{Daily News/Sun-Times}, however, comprehensively covered high school sports in the Chicago-area and made editorial decisions accordingly.\textsuperscript{16}

The newspaper landscape in Chicago would soon change. In 1982, the Tribune Co. built a printing plant, the Freedom Center, which allowed for printing multiple zoned editions. The downtown bureau sent Youngman to the \textit{Suburban Tribune}’s Hinsdale office to help the staff in adjusting to the new possibilities in journalism technology. “The vision was that we wouldn’t need to have a separate edition in order to get zoned news
into the paper,” Youngman said about the hopeful prospects of the printing plant. “We envisioned being able to do that all on deadline.” Youngman’s task was to “be in charge of the Suburban Trib sports operation to integrate its people and its work into the flow of the downtown paper as we moved toward eliminating those inserts.” The envisioned outcome would be to decrease the editions, but publish on deadline. The Suburban Tribune, thus, folded.

The elimination of the Suburban Tribune carried significant implications for its primary suburban competitor, the Daily Herald, as well as for the Tribune. The folding of the Suburban Tribune allowed for the Daily Herald to expand into other suburban areas and grow in circulation. The Herald, as Youngman remembered, “began to cover the things that the Suburban Trib used to cover,” reaching seventeen zones at one point. Frisk confirmed the Herald’s expansion. “The paper kept growing,” Frisk said. “I mean we got up to about I think 160,000 circulation, which is pretty good.” With that circulation, the Daily Herald at one point became the third largest newspaper in the state of Illinois. This meant that the Herald now covered more schools, and more sports. While the Herald’s reach of high school sports grew, the Tribune’s declined.17

The Tribune’s sports department changed in staff and in content. Approximately fifteen members of the Suburban Tribune sports staff, most of whom covered primarily high school sports, moved to the downtown office. Ultimately, this move turned out to be a “bad business strategy,” according to Youngman. He added, “As people who had come to an advertisers and readers who had come to enjoy the sort of feel of a separate paper just for them thought that the stuff they were interested in was being marginalized and they were perfectly used to the fact it was a day late and didn’t really care.” Although
these writers initially continued to write about prep sports, with the Tribune’s shift to pro sports, they gradually moved into men’s college sports and men’s pro sports beats. The Tribune, as I point out later, developed additional sections for sports-related stories. These sections targeted a different demographic of readers and adhered to different journalistic criteria than the sports section.¹⁸

The demographic changes in the city’s readership, notably the movement of urbanites to the suburbs led to an expansion of localized coverage, including that of sports. Suburban papers, such as the Suburban Tribune and the Daily Herald, gained more prominence in circulation size and in page numbers. According to the sports journalists, local sports coverage played an important role at these papers in drawing readers who wanted to read about their own school or their children’s participation in sport. The journalists also remembered a major shift in style of high school sports coverage, moving from scores and game reports to including young athletes’ voices in the paper. Presumably this shift resulted from the belief that “kids’ names,” as some of the journalists said, would draw readers.

The increased prominence of high school sports coverage in during this time period in Chicago coincided with the expansion of girls’ and women’s sports teams. For sports editors who already valued high school sports coverage for its ability to evoke a sense of community among the readers, girls’ coverage fit into that model. The Suburban Tribune journalists named Bill Van Kirk and Owen Youngman as key figures in fostering an environment at the Suburban Tribune that included girls’ sports. John Radtke and Howard Schlossberg, both of whom worked for Bob Frisk at the Daily Herald, raved about the editor’s commitment to girls’ sports. “From the day I started at the Daily
Herald, I knew that girls’ sports were going to be treated as equally as boys,” Radtke recalled. “And that is one-hundred percent because of Bob Frisk. He had an incredible passion—still does have an incredible passion—for girls’ sports.” Steve Tucker, who worked for Taylor Bell, at the Sun-Times likewise credited the high school sports editor for giving him space to cover girls’ sports. “I think we did an enormous amount [of girls’ coverage] and a lot of that is because Taylor Bell let me do it.” Sports writers remembered their editors, as key forces behind enabling the visibility of girls’ sports.

But, as I noted earlier, the expansion of teams and supportive editors did not automatically lead to more robust coverage. In fact, although the high school sport section, with its community-oriented focus, made room for youth sports overall, sports journalists articulated a number of criteria that girls’ (and women’s) sports had to meet in order to receive attention. The high school sports section, thus, did not escape the male-as-norm standards embedded in the sports department’s decision making processes.

Had to “Deserve” It: Selection Criteria for Girls’ and Women’s Sports

The sports department, overall, adhered to standards that privileged men’s sports over women’s. These standards applied to all coverage, including that of high school sports. In remembering girls’ and women’s sports, journalists reproduced dominant notions about gender in sports journalism, but they also articulated their own sense of agency in disrupting, what they viewed as, structural forces. Their memories constructed particular criteria about story selection process. These criteria were far from neutral. Underneath narratives about market constraints, journalists’ memories exposed gendered
assumptions deeply engrained in journalistic norms. Further, they reveal the complicated ways in which journalists perceived their own work in advocacy of girls’ and women’s sports, as well as how they rationalized the exclusion of girls and women from coverage. These conventions on the one hand justify the dominance of boys’ and men’s sports in coverage, but on the other hand foreground strategies that journalists’ remembered as effective in disrupting male-dominance.\(^{19}\)

Despite the fact the sports pages at several Chicago newspapers expanded in the 1970s, sports editors frequently cited space constraints as the reason why girls’ and women’s sports got left out from coverage. This rationale became particularly salient once girls’ and women’s teams not only expanded but became successful. The Tribune’s Youngman explained the space-related challenge the following way,

> What are you going to not cover if you start [covering women’s sports]? You’re not going to get more space. The Tribune was one of the earliest newspapers to strictly budget how much space was allocated by day by week by year to each department. You had X number of columns of space. It varied by day and so you couldn’t go to the boss and say, well, you know I want an extra page because I’m going to start covering women’s sports.\(^{20}\)

Editors who oversaw high school sports expressed similar dilemmas. “It’s a big jigsaw puzzle when you have a page and a half,” Frisk of the Herald said. “Everybody has their special interest.” Photographs in particular presented a problem because of staff and space constraints. However, Frisk said he also had to worry about balance among schools. “And then you get the jealousy between schools which is huge around here,” Frisk added. “I mean that’s really huge. They always think you favor one school over the other.” The Daily News and the Sun-Times, in Bell’s memory, faced similar issues. Coaches and parents would call the newsroom because they felt that their respective
schools got shafted. As the suburbs expanded schools began adding sports, not only girls’ sports, but also minor boys’ sports. He said that the problem became that there were just “too many sports.” The emergence of athletic opportunities, thus, presented a challenge for editors in piecing together the sports pages.21

In light of these constraints, girls and women often had to “deserve” coverage. At the Tribune, Youngman said, that girls and women “took a backseat to other things, but there was always some coverage…when a team did particularly well in whether it was high school or college there would be [coverage].” Marla Krause, who worked at the downtown Tribune as associate sports editor in the 1980s, confirmed the criteria, “There is a lot of competition in town like this where there’s so much going on.” The newspaper generally prioritized around the Bears, the Cubs, the Sox and the Bulls. Krause said that in that market the paper could not give space to a story “just because it’s women’s sports,” but that the story “has to kind of be worth it.”22

Journalists also said that women’s sports received at least some attention on the sports pages because some of the men’s professional teams were “horrible in those years,” Krause remembered. “We were just kind of tired about writing about those okay teams.” The Tribune wanted to give the readers “something different.” Further explaining the decision making, Krause said that “slow news days” enabled coverage of women’s sports:

You could look in a newspaper or maybe a section front and you see a story out there [and think] oh, must have been a slow news day because otherwise that story never would’ve gotten such prominence. So I think there was some of that with women’s sports.
To fill in space during slow news days and time periods when the men’s teams did not play well, the *Tribune* included stories of women’s sports.²³

The *Daily News/Sun-Times* and the *Daily Herald* editors said that they consistently reported on boys’ and girls’ competition, such as state tournaments, but that boys’ sports—especially basketball—in Illinois simply had a longer tradition and, thus, received more attention. “On Sundays, for example, we gave a full page round up to girls’ sports, a full page round up to boys’ sports, and then depending on the outstanding individual games or events that were happening, there would be extra space,” Bell said.

But Bell also implied that the paper would naturally privilege boys’ sports because of their longer tradition and popularity in the state. That said, a successful girls’ team would certainly merit space. For instance, Frisk remembered the Main West High School girls’ basketball team which had a 65-game winning streak in 1988. “That became a big story,” Frisk said. “And that got some attention and even made the national news. You needed something like that to really bring girls’ sports.” Editors suggested that in a saturated sports market, where newspapers faced space constraints, girls’ and women’s sports had to excel to disrupt the default rules whereby boy’s and men’s sports naturally deserved coverage.²⁴

At times, the team’s success in itself was not enough: To get coverage, even nationally ranked teams needed a push. Reflecting back on the journalistic norms of the times, sports journalists attributed the visibility of girls’ and women’s sports both to the teams’ success and to editors’ and writers’ persistency in advocating for coverage. Krause said that the *Tribune*, at some point, had a supervisor who “liked a lot of the smaller sports.” His interest would result in coverage of non-revenue sports, including
girls’ and women’s interscholastic sports. “[The editor] had gone to a small Division III school, so every once in a while [he] came out of nowhere, you know, we’d be suddenly interested in Division III lacrosse.” But these interests, Krause said, only lasted “for a week and then it would fall off the radar until the next time he’d say ‘there is a Division III basketball tournament.’” The hierarchy, according to Krause, was clear. Girls and women’s sports needed editors’ interest in non-mainstream men’s professional sports to even stand in chance for coverage.25

At the Sun-Times, Bell praised Steve Tucker’s commitment to bringing visibility to DePaul University’s women’s basketball team at the paper. “[Tucker] had a lot of trouble trying to convince people that [the Sun-Times] should be covering DePaul women’s basketball because the editors didn’t realize that…they were nationally ranked,” Bell remembered. “I know he would always make the argument [that] there is more people watching and attending the DePaul women’s games than are attending some of the other things that they were covering.” Those who wanted to see more girls’ and women’s coverage often faced “hard-heads” and “ignorant people” or people who would say that “girls’ sports shouldn’t be in the paper.” But, as Bell said, “DePaul opened its own door” with its success and “allowed [Tucker] to be able to cover them on a regular basis.” To disrupt the systems of exclusion, girls’ and women’s sports needed both success and allies, according to the sports journalists.26

In their memories of the 1970s and 1980s, sports journalists attributed the exclusion of girls’ and women’s coverage to forces that on the surface appear neutral (i.e., space, tradition, and so forth) but in fact privilege boys’ and men’s sports coverage. Girls and women did not automatically meet the criteria for coverage based on these
standards. Despite the fact that sports journalists considered high school pages as more inclusive of girls’ sports, their memories of the selection process point to a male-as-norm standard that prevailed in the sports departments. Sports journalists, even those who served as decision-makers, cited their respective newspapers’ market orientation in assessing the forces that shaped girls’ and women’s sports coverage.

Market forces also pushed stories about women outside of the sports pages into other sections of the newspaper. These sections, on the one hand, provided an alternative outlet for coverage, but, on the other hand, conveniently removed women from the sports pages into a neatly segregated space. To gain a more complete understanding of journalistic norms in relation to gender, sports journalists’ memories call attention to the coverage that otherwise would not have appeared on the sports pages.

Recreation Sports/Fitness: Spotlight on Women

In the 1970s and 1980s, sports sections across the country saw a dramatic increase in page numbers. The Chicago Tribune, mirroring other major city newspapers, provided more and more space for sports coverage. In a 25-year span up to 1975, the average length of a sports story increased by 3 inches. The foci gravitated from horse racing, boxing and golf to men’s basketball, which became the third most popular sport after football and baseball. A study documenting the changes in the Tribune sports pages in the 20th century found that the coverage shifted from “amateur to professional, from local or regional events to national ones, and from individual to team sporting activity.” Such expansion did not result in a dramatic increase in women’s sports coverage: In 1975 only
4.1% of all sports stories reported on female athletes—a startling stagnation since 1950 when that figure stood at 4.0%. Although temporary the Tribune increased its high school sports staff, once the Suburban Tribune folded in the mid-1980s, these writers moved to covering men’s college and professional sports, thus further exacerbating the emphasis on elite-level men’s team sports.27

Editors and journalists explained the shift toward elite-level men’s sports citing readers’ interest. Youngman, who oversaw and even facilitated some of the technological and staff changes for the Tribune, said “The changing priorities of interest of sports fans ultimately drove increases in coverage, but the sports pages, just like the news pages reflected the perception of the editors’ expectations of what the audience was looking for.” The audience for the sports pages, as the Tribune editors envisioned, consisted of Cubs, Sox, Bears and Bulls fans who would “love all that stuff.” These “guys,” Tribune sports journalists Mike Conklin speculated, “go to the bars,” “drink,” “smoke cigars,” “go to the games,” and “follow the standings and the statistics religiously.” These “guys” did not, presumably, read about women’s sports. Bob Sakamoto, who moved from the Suburban Tribune to the downtown bureau, estimated that in the mid-1980s men’s sports coverage took up around 95% of the sports pages. The Tribune placed a tremendous emphasis on men’s college and professional sports, based on perceived interest of the readers.28

In light of women’s exclusion from sports pages, some sports journalists took advantage of other sections of the paper to write about women. Two sections of the Tribune proved utilitarian in this endeavor: the “Recreation” section and the “Venture” section. The sports editors often “rented out” sports writers to contribute to these sections
with stories that otherwise would not “get play” in the sports section—in other words, stories that did not fit the elite-level men’s sports formula. The Recreation and the Venture sections included stories about community sports, recreational leagues, and emerging activities. The emergence of these sections reflected changes in the newspaper landscape: the Recreation section, so to speak, “transferred over” from the *Suburban Tribune* when the inserts ceased to exist while the Venture section sought to attract new advertisers. These sections did not inherently foster a more equitable treatment of women; in fact, by segregating women’s sports into “recreation” and “fitness” further reified hierarchies of gender and athleticism. However, these sections enabled journalists to escape the male-as-norm standards of the sports section and subsequently use the spaces to cover women. Sports journalists who contributed to these sections found a way to showcase women’s participation in leagues, teams, and competition that would otherwise never meet the journalistic criteria for coverage in the sports section.29

One of the writers who wrote extensively on recreational sports was Jody Homer. When the *Suburban Tribune* writers initially moved to the downtown *Tribune* newsroom in 1983, they continued covering the more localized sporting events. Before the editors assigned the Illinois basketball beat to her, Homer would write about groups otherwise marginalized. She did not remember much about these stories, but she remembered that these stories did not come easily. “One of the things I found challenging about being a journalist was coming up with story ideas,” Homer said. “So I’m looking for something with a hook, with an angle, something that’s a little different and interesting.” To come up with story ideas, she would read community papers and pay attention to press releases that different groups sent to the newsroom.30
Often, the groups looking for coverage and sending in press releases about their activities were women’s teams. In the 1980s, women established recreational opportunities, even leagues, to pursue sports that they previously could not access. The shift caught newspapers’ attention. “There was a sense that women are starting to do these things now and we should put a little spotlight on this,” Homer said. She put a spotlight on quite a few emerging initiatives that drew women’s participation. For instance, she wrote about women who became involved with the outdoors as previously “women deprived themselves of the recreational adventures that nature provides outdoors;” about an amateur squash league, which was “all there [was] for women” who wanted to pursue the sport, about rugby, which was unusual as “women weren’t supposed to get dirty,” and even about football, which “[had been an exclusive domain of men until the last few years.” For many women, these were the first opportunities in their life to become an “athlete,” as they grew up before Title IX’s legal and cultural influences changed the sporting landscape. And many of these sports fell outside of the typical athletic activities in which women engaged.31

In the late 1970s, another section emerged in the Tribune pages that offered an opening for coverage of women’s athletic activities: the Venture section. Mike Conklin was one of the sportswriters who the sports department “rented out.” Conklin described the Venture section as an “advertising initiative.” He called such description “cruel,” but “the truth.” The Venture section attempted to adhere to the growing craze about fitness. With health clubs “popping up all over the place,” the Tribune recognized an opportunity for advertising revenue. While the sports section contained advertisements for products that encouraged sports consumption, the Venture section advertised equipment, venues,
and products that encouraged sports participation. The launch of the Venture section mirrored the nation-wide rise in the popularity of fitness, which targeted particularly women. Corporate advertisers found a new avenue and the *Tribune* ensured to provide space for that advertising.32

Although the Venture section intended to emphasize fitness, Conklin decided to get creative. “We pretty much had carte blanche what we wanted to do there,” Conklin remembered. “So for me that was a chance to go nuts, you know, and just write about stuff that never got written about in the sports section.” Women often played a central role in his stories. He wrote about women’s participation in otherwise unusual activities, such as air ballooning or mopeds, but with the editorial freedom, he also wrote about competitive sports that received little to no attention on the sports pages. “I could write about top women bowlers,” Conklin explained. “I could write about top women tennis players on a local level. That would never appear in the [sports] section.” Some of Conklin’s stories disrupted the original intent of the section. Additional to the fitness oriented stories about women, he covered organized elite-level women’s sports, which in his mind should have appeared in the sports section.33

One such story, and the one in which Conklin takes much pride, appeared on the first page on the Venture section and seeped into the second page, a nearly two-full-pages-long article titled “Unsung Athletes: 10 Who Are Tops.” A photo on the front page depicted 10 sportswomen in their respective uniforms, with some piece of equipment that symbolizes their sport. In the opening paragraphs, Conklin wrote “There’s no getting around it: Women do not have a high profile in sports. Most sports fans would be hard pressed to come up with the names of 10 famous, active female athletes—amateur or
professional.” Describing the changes Title IX brought to interscholastic sports for women and women’s increasing interest in sports, Conklin added,

Meanwhile, thousands of adult women have already achieved a high level of unrecognized competence in local sports. Some have reached the pinnacle, others are working hard at specific goals. Many are active simply out of love to compete, since Title IX came along too late. Others chose a sport out of the mainstream. There usually are no material rewards and more likely the women have had to make big sacrifices to stay active.34

Chicago, Conklin argued in the article, was a perfect example where these changes were happening. When reflecting back upon these stories in the Venture section about women’s sports, Conklin admitted “I didn’t necessarily do this as like I was a big advocate for women’s causes, to be honest with you.” He added, “I was much more a David and Goliath guy. I just like writing about underdogs all the time. You know, things that I thought deserve publicity no matter what it was.” Since women’s sports deserved publicity but did not get space in the sports section, Conklin used the Venture section to write these stories, thereby disrupting—even if just momentarily—the systematic exclusion of competitive women’s athletics from the Tribune’s coverage.35

As important as these stories were in bringing visibility to the sports women play, they were short-lived. The Recreation and the Venture sections provided space for sports writers to cover stories, about women in particular, that would not receive attention in the increasingly elite-level men-oriented Tribune sports pages. The articles about women participating in squash, bowling, rugby, football, and weight-lifting clearly indicated that women played sports and engaged in a variety of organized endeavors. But by the mid-1980s, the Tribune completely eliminated the various inserts and Conklin returned to the sports section. Homer’s recreation-type articles occasionally appeared in the Metro
section of the paper, but once the editors assigned her to the college basketball beat, stories on recreation and, thereby stories on women, significantly declined.

Based upon journalists’ accounts, it appears that the Suburban Tribune writers, including Homer, gradually moved into covering elite-level men’s sports. Without the suburban readers, the Tribune—instead of replacing recreational sports writers—eliminated these stories altogether. Similar the articles that used to appear in the Venture section did not find space in the sports section. The temporary visibility of women’s sport in the Recreation and Venture sections did not last long. Instead of continuing with this coverage, sports writers (willingly or as assigned by editors) increasingly gravitated toward beats in men’s sports, at the expense of women’s sports.

**Conclusion**

In an assessment of the sports journalism industry, sports media scholar Marie Hardin notes, “Perhaps nowhere else in American newspapers is the potential to ‘create interest’ in events stronger than in sports sections.” She adds, “What is printed in sports sections does more than simply reflect the status quo, it helps shape it.” Building upon the promotional roots of sport’s relationship with mass media, newspapers have historically helped in popularizing and commercializing certain sports over others. Pointing to industry norms, sports media scholar Mark Douglas Lowes writes that “News industry economics dictate that metropolitan dailies fill their sports pages almost exclusively with news from the world of major-league sport.” Newspapers continued to
privilege men’s professional sports even as women’s participation in elite-level competition escalated.36

To provide a deeper look into how newspapers reacted to the boost in women’s sport, this chapter points to the complicated relationship between market forces, professional standards, and journalists’ attitudes. Beginning from the 1960s into the 1980s, the Chicago newspaper landscape underwent significant changes. The migration of readers to the suburbs created new opportunities for expansion of suburban papers and prompted inner-city papers to follow their readers. These changes contributed to, or at least coincided, with changes in the structure of the sports pages. The complex developments of newspapers’ emergence/expansion (the Daily Herald and the Suburban Tribune) and folding (the Suburban Tribune and the Daily News) both created new opportunities and solidified barriers for girls and women.

Citing space limitations, reader interest, and saturation of the sport market, sports journalists rationalized the exclusion of women from the sports pages and normalized the emphasis on men’s sports. When women began competing in larger numbers, journalists said, newspapers could not just start covering them all of a sudden. Women had to deserve coverage to make it to the sports pages. Although “neutral” on the surface, these section criteria reflect and reproduce what feminist scholars call “false, hegemonic ideology that men are, and should remain, superior to women in sport and (by extension) the culture.” The migration of readers to the suburbs and the changes in newspaper landscape might be specific to Chicago, but sports journalists’ attitudes and decision-making processes reflected larger trends scholars observed about the industry in the US and in Western Europe. As sport journalism scholars Annelies Knoppers and Agnes
Elling argue, women tend to only deserve coverage when they achieve a “top performance” whereas men receive coverage because “it is self-evident that they meet [the] criteria” for newsworthiness. The Chicago market offers further insight into how professional standards have normalized the exclusion of girls’ and women from the sports pages within a specific metropolitan environment.\(^{37}\)

This chapter identifies two distinct space in the newspaper where girls’ and women’s sports merited coverage, the high school section and the recreational sections. Sports journalists distinguished these sections from (elite-level coverage on the) sports pages in their target audience, market orientation, journalistic values, and selection criteria. As I explain earlier in the chapter, the emergence of these sections is connected to changes in the sports industry as well as to cultural and structural transformations for women in sport.

The move from reporting statistics to including athletes’ voices changed how newspapers with a high school section reported on interscholastic sports. As high schools added more teams, newspapers (especially the suburban ones) saw an opportunity to attract readers, namely parents. In this case, editors cited reader interest and economic incentives to include girls’ sports. Although the extent to which these newspapers actually reported on girls’ sports would require a more thorough content analysis, at the very least youth sports provided an opening for inclusion. That said, even in this space girls needed to achieve exceptional results, such as a 65-match winning streak, to deserve regular coverage. At any rate, a notable lesson from sports journalists’ memories is that the inclusion of girls’ sports in the high school sections, considering the market conditions, could not have possibly mirrored the progressive growth of girls’ athletics in
the Chicago-area. The emergence, folding, and restructuring of newspapers in city and the suburbs significantly altered how sports departments approached coverage. Through these changes, the male-as-norm standard prevailed.

The fitness-oriented pages of the papers, such as the Tribune’s “Recreation” and “Venture” sections, corresponded with the nationwide fitness craze, which by and large targeted women. In these sections differed significantly from the sports section in content and presumed readership. For the most part, the articles focused on hobbies and non-organized, non-competitive physical activities. In the 1980s, these sections reflected backlash in US culture in response to the previous decades’ women’s empowerment. In many ways, these sections allowed newspapers to conveniently remove women from the sports pages into highly commercialized aesthetic-oriented spaces, as sport historian Jaime Schultz argues, “at the expense of serious women’s sports.” These attitudes manifested in media coverage, especially magazines, and, as this chapter illustrates, filtered into newspapers.38

But journalists’ memories also differ significantly from some of the patterns feminist sport scholars observed in conversations with sports media professionals. Importantly, sports journalists claimed they acted as agents in including and promoting women in coverage despite structural constraints. The editors did not downplay girls’ and women’s sports and, in fact, many said that they and their colleagues took conscious steps to ensure that girls’ and women receive coverage. They saw girls’ and women’s inclusion in the various sections of the paper not as “impossible, undesirable and unnatural,” as Knoppers and Elling find, but as necessary, just, and even normal. Sports journalists remembered few yet noteworthy instances when they or their colleague acted
against the status quo to write about female athletes. In negotiating market forces and selection criteria, sports journalists expressed a selective approach to choice.\textsuperscript{39}

These choices, however, did not amount to drastic change in news values. Coverage of women’s sport remained slim. Building upon this chapter’s analysis of media market conditions and institutional norms, I turn to a more in-depth look into the consequences of these forces upon content. In the next chapter, I examine how ideas about gender and sexuality appeared in journalists’ memories and in their articles. As I illustrate, well-meaning efforts to include women in the sports pages may not necessarily result in positive, empowering representations.

Notes


\textsuperscript{2} Sociologist Mark Baldrassare defined suburban communities as “the municipalities and places in metropolitan areas outside of the political boundaries of the large cities,” which lack a central, downtown, district and politically uniform local government. Since the 1950s and 1960s, city residents moved to the suburbs in increasing numbers and commuted to the city for their jobs. Mark Baldassare, “Suburban Communities,” Annual Review of Sociology 18 (1992): 477.

\textsuperscript{3} Knoppers and Elling, “We Do Not Engage in Promotional Journalism,” 70-71.

\textsuperscript{4} “Newsroom System at Field Newspapers Interfaces Existing IMB Computers,” Editor & Publisher, 108.50 (December 13, 1975): 33. “Zone Suburban Editions Follow Automation Move,” Editor & Publisher, 110.11 (March 12, 1977), 36.


9 Although few studies examined high school sports coverage, Erin Whiteside and Jody Rightler-McDaniels described prep sports coverage as following tenets of community journalism. Community journalism is, as they wrote, “generally more inclusive than what is available at outlets that do not serve focused communities,’ informed by a “sense of thoughtfulness toward members of the community.” The sports journalists I talked to did not identify their work with prep sports in terms of community journalism, but their descriptions of the values and criteria that drove coverage are consistent. Erin Whiteside and Jodi L. Rightler-McDaniels, “Moving Toward Parity?: Dominant Gender Ideology Versus Community Journalism in High School Basketball Coverage,” *Mass Communication and Society* 16, no. 6 (2013): 824.


11 Frisk interview. Howard Schlossberg, interview with the author, May 28, 2014, Chicago, Illinois. See also, Chapter 1 on Paddock Olympics.


15 Susan Sternberg, interview with the author, June 20, 2014, telephone.

16 Bell interview.

17 Youngman interview. Frisk interview.


19 Knoppers and Elling, “We Do Not Engage in Promotional Journalism.”

20 Youngman interview.

21 Frisk interview.


23 Bob Sakamoto said that “both the Cubs and the White Sox were horrible in those years.” The other quotes come from an interview with Marla Krause. Sakamoto interview. Krause interview.

24 Bell interview. Frisk interview.

25 Krause interview.

26 Bell interview.


The Recreation pages would appear in, what was called the “City Trib: Sports Extra” or other such inserts. The Venture pages typically appeared between the Metropolitan section and the Classified Ads.


Knoppers and Elling, “We Do Not Engage in Promotional Journalism,” 70.
Chapter 6

Poignant Profiles: Television, Femininity, and Athleticism

In 1972, Pete Axthelm, Newsweek’s Olympic writer, contently consumed his drink in one of Munich’s hotel bar after filing his stories from the first week of the Olympic Games, began Skip Myslenski’s article in the Chicago Tribune. “Then, unexpectedly, he is paged for an international call, and he is more than a little surprised to hear the voice of his editor when he picks up the phone,” Myslenski continued. The editor asked, “Nice job. But what about Olga Korbut?” To which, the writer replied “Who?” Axthelm, the journalist who reported from Munich, never heard of Korbut, Myslenski wrote, but the US audiences did. Korbut, the 17-year-old gymnast from the Soviet Union impressed the judges at the 1972 Games with her backward somersault and a standing backward somersault on the balance beam and in the floor competition. With this performance, she “bedazzled the Olympic’s TV audience back at home.” This moment defined media coverage for decades ahead.¹

In the 1970s and 1980s, women saw great strides in elite-level competition. With their accomplishments, activism, and even mere participation, they left a lasting mark on the history of women’s sport. Olga Korbut, whom several Tribune journalists remembered, serves as a great example. Korbut’s performance at the Munich Olympic, according to historians, redefined the sport: She “began to shift the main gymnastic style away from the feminine, balletic style” toward a more athletic, technical style. Korbut
illustrates the mainstream media’s treatment of prominent female athletes at the time. Korbut, sport scholars argue, became popular both for her athletic excellence and for her ability to display “charm, vulnerability, and humanity”—traits that the media could exploit for the purposes of reinforcing appropriate gender roles.²

Because women’s athleticism represented an inherent contradiction to sport’s association with masculinity, female athletes challenged contemporary gender norms. These tensions appeared in media coverage during the 1970s and 1980s. Sport sociologist Michael Messner argues that during this time female athletes became a “contested ideological terrain” upon which social constructions of femininity clashed with those of athleticism. Media representations of female athletes became embedded with this tension, ultimately asking “Can a woman be strong, aggressive, competitive, and still be considered feminine?” The answer, as a plethora of studies conclude, was yes, but only within certain boundaries: Only of they displayed a type of gender performance that embraced athletic competence only if neatly packaged within (hetero)sexual attractiveness.³

This chapter focuses on sports journalists’ perceptions of dominant gender norms. Here, I draw primarily upon journalist’ responses to two questions: “Which female athletes or women's sporting events do you remember most vividly?,” and “What do you remember as the most pertinent issues women in sport faced in the 1970s and 1980s?”

Journalists gave a variety of answers to the first question, but their answers overlapped in relation to four athletes/sports (which from here on I refer to as “events”): 1) Women’s gymnastics, and specifically Olga Korbut, during the Olympics, 2) Women’s professional tennis, specifically Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova, at the Virginia Slims Circuit in
Chicago, 3) Women’s professional basketball, specifically the Chicago Hustle in the Women’s Professional Basketball League, and 4) NCAA Division I softball, specifically Lisa Ishikawa, who played for Northwestern University. I focus on these four events not only because the journalists named them specifically, but also because in my analysis of newspaper articles these events appeared to have received more systematic coverage than other women’s sports/athletes. Further, interviews and articles situate these four events as central sites upon which female athletes contested dominant gender norms. Sports journalists said that female athletes negotiated femininity and athleticism, often in order to distance themselves from the stigma of lesbianism. Thus, coverage of gymnastics, tennis, basketball, and softball provides insight into how journalists, at the time, addressed the changing gender ideals and which attributes journalists prioritized in coverage of women’s sports.4

Unlike the other chapters, here I focus specifically on the Chicago Tribune. I do so for several reasons. First, the Chicago Tribune merits special attention because, as the primary paper and the only one with a national scope, it had the largest sports department in the city. As such, the paper could dedicate the resources and the staff to covering a wide variety of sports beyond the immediate local environment. During economically prosperous times, including the 1970s and 1980s, the Tribune sent reporters to national and international events. Second, even though scholarship that assesses trends in women’s sport history and coverage tends to slant toward publications on the East coast (i.e., New York and Washington), many studies in fact use the Tribune as a primary source, presumably because the paper resembles the sports pages of the major papers in other big cities in the United States. In fact, one study focuses solely on the Tribune’s
sports pages, providing a precise account of the amount of coverage (4.1%) women’s sports received. Finally, from a methodological perspective, narrowing this chapter down to one paper allows me to gain a more in-depth understanding of how sports journalists at one paper wrote about women’s sport and how their individual styles of writing came together to form an image of a female athlete for the Tribune’s readers.5

In the 1970s and the 1980s, stories about women constituted around 5% of all Chicago Tribune sports coverage. In light of the dramatic underrepresentation, it is much more important to identify how journalists wrote about female athletes in those—comparative to men—few articles. But it is also important to move beyond representations and understand how everyday practices, personal relationships, and cultural norms shaped this coverage. By centering journalists’ voices in relation to, what we would identify now as, “historical moments” in women’s sport, this analysis complements existing scholarship to provide an interpretive framework for assessing coverage. This chapter certainly does not explain why women’s sports coverage stagnated, but by coupling journalists’ memories with their articles it provides a glimpse into contemporary gender norms as articulated in Chicago’s major newspaper.6

**Historical Context**

The sport media landscape underwent significant change in the 1960s due to two interrelated factors. Television networks capitalized upon sport’s accessibility to wider audiences and established fruitful relationships with leagues. The leagues, in turn, profited from broadcast revenues. Technological developments enabled the creation and
broadcasting of premier sporting events, which would entrench sport’s entertainment and commercial purpose. This restructuring of the sport and media environment privileged events that would attract advertisers for the purposes of mass appeal. Thus, as political economist Robert McChesney writes, “sports with limited commercial exploitation were generally accorded minimal attention.” Women’s sport, he argues, fell into that category. Writing in 1983, sport scholars Mary Boutilier and Lucinda SanGiovanni stated that the percentage of women’s sports coverage “remains extremely insignificant in relation to the actual percentage increase in women’s sports participation.” A study from the mid-1970 found that the ration of female to male photographs in a newspaper’s sports section was 1:22, while another study estimated that women received less than 1% of televised sport coverage. During this time television and newspapers developed a “complementary relationship,” providing sport coverage to different audiences but with at least one consistency: Both television and newspapers ignored women’s sport.7

Few female athletes received the attention they deserved. Tennis player Billie Jean King, and her tennis match dubbed “The Battle of the Sexes” against Bobby Riggs, was such anomaly. Played in the Houston Astrodome in front of 30,472 spectators, King defeated Riggs in this nationally televised spectacle 6-4, 6-3, 6-3. According to historian Susan Ware, the King’s victory over Riggs “forced a reexamination of what it meant to be female and an athlete.” The match became historically significant because it exposed and challenged deeply embedded values about women’s athletic competence. It also revealed much about the media’s treatment of women. Although King’s victory became a symbol of female athletes’ transcendence into spotlight, television (and other media) merely capitalized upon the spectacle and exploited this pseudo-event. As Boutilier and
SanGiovanni argue, this event showed that “television can present women’s sports in highly commercialized, entertaining, and condescending ways” while “routine coverage of women’s sports, treated as normal, acceptable, and valued sphere of athletic activity—that is, in the manner of coverage of men’s sports—will not be tolerated or encouraged.” In other words, women gained spotlight only if media could sell them in neatly packaged form for mass consumption.⁸

Perhaps no other event exemplifies a spectacle more profoundly than the Olympic Games. As the ultimate “global media event,” the heroic, nationalist, and sensational narratives of the Olympics appeal to audiences widely. In the 1970s and 1980s, this coverage perpetuated specific ideas about gender. In a series of studies sport sociologist Margaret Carlisle Duncan observed a pattern of “sexual difference,” whereby coverage of sport reflects “cultural constructed differences” which “tend to confer power upon men and limit power for women.” Olympic coverage across media outlets emphasized female athletes’ looks, sex appeal, and femininity in a way that positioned her as less of an athlete and more of a soft-porn model. This type of coverage undermined and trivialized female athletes. With the emergence of television, these frameworks became exaggerated and reproduced through a variety of media forms. Because the amount of media coverage women received during the Olympics far exceeded “regular” coverage, these representations were even more significant in defining the female athlete.⁹

During this time when women’s participation and success in sport became much more prevalent, several representation patterns constructed problematic images about female athletes, diminishing this progress. Foregrounding media representations were harmful cultural perceptions about female athletes’ perceived sexual deviance, namely
the stigma of lesbianism, a historically prevalent attitude that claimed muscular women (i.e., women who participate in sport) violate traditional norms about femininity and thus are likely not interested in men. In a fear to be labeled “lesbian,” female athletes developed a variety of strategies to assert their heterosexuality, which included both self-presentation techniques (i.e., clothing, make-up, hair) and discursive strategies (i.e., distancing themselves from being gay, expressing hostility toward muscular athletes). Tour promoters and league owners perpetuated homophobic attitudes by going out of their way to ensure that female athletes adhere to stereotypical femininity and affirm their heterosexuality.¹⁰

So while female athletes challenged the association of athleticism with masculinity, the media played a key role in keeping them constrained within rigidly defined norms about gender and sexuality. Alongside athletic competence, and at the expense of it, journalists focused extensively on female athletes’ personal lives. Referring to the 1970s and early 1980s Boutilier and SanGiovanni write that reporters “seem especially curious about the sexual orientation of sportswomen, asking pointed and incessant questions about the existence of lesbianism in a way that has been characterized as ‘so much ugly curiosity.'” Reporters’ curiosity resulted in several trends. First, media coverage of female athletes often placed great emphasis upon her male partners. In other words, if the female athlete had a husband or a boyfriend he would likely become included in the story. Second, in response to these questions female athletes often explicitly distanced themselves and their sport from the lesbian stigma. News articles tended to emphasize female athletes’ feminine attributes in order to establish that, despite their athleticism, these women still behaved like “normal” women. Altogether, these
strategies worked efficiently to construct and reproduce stereotypical representations of female athletes and punish those who did not fit into cultural norms.\textsuperscript{11}

These gender contestations appear throughout the chapter in conversations with journalists and in the \textit{Chicago Tribune’s} articles of women’s sport. The four sports upon which this chapter focuses occupy a variety position upon the gender role spectrum. A plethora of studies indicate that some sports are perceived more appropriate for women than others. For instance, team sports, which emphasize control, athletic prowess, dominance, physicality, are typically associated with masculine traits. When women participate in these sports, for instance basketball or soccer, they directly challenge standards of femininity. On the other hand, individual sports, especially the ones that emphasize aesthetics, grace, and non-contact, are typically associated with feminine traits. Thus, when women participate in these sports, for instance gymnastics or tennis, they are less likely to come under scrutiny. Adhering to these cultural norms, mainstream media in the 1970s and 1980s overrepresented women in gender-appropriate sports. Despite the fact that girls’ and women’s participation in team sports exceeded that in individual sports, tennis, and gymnastics were disproportionately more likely to receive coverage over softball or basketball. Summarizing the problems in coverage of female athletes in this time period, sport sociologist Mary Jo Kane found two problems, “First, on the whole, women’s sport is made to appear unimportant compared to the ‘real’ sport world of men; second, those sports that do receive coverage are the safe, socially ‘acceptable’ sports.” The female athlete’s sport, therefore, may mediate whether and how she appears in media.\textsuperscript{12}
Gender role conformity, or the idea that women must adhere to feminine traits in their athletic activities, significantly constrains women’s inclusion in sport and in sport media. As I illustrate in this chapter, sports journalists wrote about and vividly remembered how female athletes negotiated contemporary gender norms.

**Dramatic Elements: Olympic Coverage**

“Are we restructuring the Games just for TV?,” Frank King, chairperson of the 1988 Calgary Olympics, posited. “My answer to that is that part of the [Olympics] charter says that Games should be seen by as many people as possible.” This quote appeared in Skip Myslenski’s article in the *Chicago Tribune* during the Calgary Games in February 1988. By that time, television and the Olympics built a strong relationship; as Myslenski described, a “love affair” turned into “marriage.” *Tribune* journalists identified one key moment as an indicator of television’s impact upon Olympic media—including their own paper: 1972 Munich Olympics, and specifically Olga Korbut. Television from then on influenced the way *Tribune* journalists reported on the Olympics.\(^\text{13}\)

“I don’t think you can overemphasize [the role of television],” Skip Myslenski asserted. When *Newsweek* editors told Axthelm to, as Myslenski put it, “leave the bar and scramble to find out who this little Olga Korbut kid is,” stayed in journalists memories. “That’s the first time I became aware of the kind of impact televised coverage can have,” Myslenski remembered, adding,

By the time we went to Montreal four years later, you knew you had to cover Nadia Comaneci because you knew that NBC was going to have her all over their telecasts. I think that’s where a lot of it changed. Ever since [those] ’72 Games, a
lot of newspaper coverage has been geared to what, you know, television is going to highlight.\textsuperscript{14}

Television’s influence on newspaper coverage became apparent to Phil Hersh too, who began writing about the Olympics in the early 1980s—a decade after Myslenski. Hersh echoed Myslenski’s assessment that television coverage shaped the \textit{Tribune}’s sports section during the Olympics. “Over the years what we’ve tried to do is if television is making a huge deal out of a story, whether that decision is right or wrong, you have to react to it a little bit,” Hersh said. “I mean, if you think what they are doing is preposterous, you try not to overreact, but you have to react because most people who are reading your story are still getting the impression of what’s happening from television.”

The journalists felt television’s agenda setting power in their own work.\textsuperscript{15}

The broadcasts, according to the journalists, followed a particular format and emphasized certain sports over others. To make the stories more appealing, networks would focus on emotion, drama, and conflict. Hersh remembered that ABC “pioneered the Olympic profile” and “would sometimes do these very emotionally poignant profiles of people.” The result was that “the world would be introduced to an athlete who they had no idea about and whom they would forget as soon as the Olympics were over.”

These profiles focused less on athletic accomplishments and more on personal challenges, which symbolized real life situations for the audiences.\textsuperscript{16}

Women’s sports, and the frameworks through which media in general presented women’s sports, provided a plethora of opportunities for networks to further reinforce dominant ideals about femininity. Television networks promoted individual, gender-appropriate sports, most notably gymnastics and figure skating. The rationale behind
broadcasting gymnastics and figure skating lay, according to Myslenski, in network executives’ mission to “make these cute little pixie girls a part of the telecast.” Thus, networks promoted specific ideologies of gender in their Olympic broadcasts, a prominent one being infantilized hyperfemininity.17

Coverage of sports such as gymnastics intruded into Tribune’s sports pages. “Look, gymnastics got their space in the nation’s consciousness simply because of television,” Myslenski explained the process. “You have to [cover] gymnastics. It’s very televised. You have to [cover] figure skating, same thing at the Winter Olympics.” As a Tribune writer he felt that he had to cover these two sports “simply because that’s going to be on prime time TV show.” Hersh agreed. Gymnasts, such as Comaneci, “generated a lot of attention” and “women have always been the story in figure skating.” Following television’s lead, the journalists remembered writing about gymnastics and figure skating extensively.

Although Tribune journalists sounded critical of television broadcasts, their articles at times reproduced the broadcasts’ story-telling techniques. For example, Linda Kay’s article about rhythmic gymnastics during the 1984 Los Angeles Games both identified the role of television and reproduced how television positioned female athletes. Rhythmic gymnastics, which Kay named “the Cinderella sport of the Olympic Games,” lived “in the shadow of its older step-sister, artistic.” She, then, continued, “Ignored for so long, [rhythmic gymnastics] has finally gotten a chance to go to the ball, the Games. It is about to meet Prince Charming [ABC-TV] and, naturally, live happily ever after.” The athletes “look graceful,” do the movements “with a smile,” full of “grace and curves and
flow,” rather than “muscular bodies.” This article, supported by journalists’ memories illustrated television’s influence upon Tribune’s coverage.18

Other times, television’s gendered narratives of drama and conflict in women’s sport appeared more subtly. Hersh’s articles on runner Mary Decker illustrate such coverage. He wrote,

For years, Mary Decker had represented whatever public consciousness there was of women’s track in America. The combination of her attractiveness, steely nerve in competition and fragile psyche made Decker the most endearing of heroines, the one seemingly destined to be our golden poster girl at the Olympics.

The story received a plethora of attention in newsmedia during and after the Olympics. Decker’s rivalry with Zola Budd, a South African runner who acquired British citizenship in order to be able to compete at the Olympics, turned into a conflict in Los Angeles. During the final of the 3,000 meter run, Decker tripped on Budd’s feet, which caused her to fall. Hersh retold the event for the Tribune readers little over a year later when he wrote that Decker’s and Budd’s rivalry “was part sideshow, part soap opera as Decker and Budd quite literally tangled in the final of the 3,000 meter run at the 1984 Olympics.” The Olympics, as Hersh wrote, turned into “Malice in Wonderland” when “Mary the Sweetheart had become Mary the Heartless after her verbal slaughter of Zola the Innocent.” This story uses gendered signifiers to describe women’s athletic accomplishments.19

Sports journalists identified profiles as a popular story format during the Olympics. But profiles, which conveyed drama, conflict and personal elements, served the coverage of other sports, namely tennis. High profile women’s tennis players and their personal lives caught sports journalists attention and prominently appeared in the
coverage of major tournaments. These memories and articles offer further insight into the type of coverage female athletes received.

The Personal Side: Golden Age of Women’s Tennis

Sports journalists characterized the 1970s and the 1980s as the “golden age” for women’s tennis. Billie Jean King’s league, the Virginia Slims Circuit which had a Chicago stop, the exciting rivalries between Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova, and Chicago-native Andrea Jaeger’s sensational teenage performances grabbed headlines. “It seemed like there was a lot more interest than now,” sports reporter Mike Conklin remembered. “Now maybe it’s just me and my interest isn’t there but it certainly seemed like women were grabbing great headlines in tennis at one point—Wimbledon and all these sort of things—you know, more than the men.” Others likewise recognized the time period as unique for women’s tennis. “We covered tennis off and on,” associate sports editor Marla Krause began. “Because Billie Jean King was—I don’t know if she was living in Chicago then, but she was so popular and, you know, it was also a golden age. You had Chris [Evert] and Martina [Navratilova],” she added. “Tennis was very very popular. But again, I think that weird how popular women’s tennis was in the country at the time.” Although Krause admitted that the Tribune would “forget about it” “between Wimbledon and the US Open,” she said that “when there was a big event going on, we cared a lot.” Tribune journalists remembered tennis as a popular women’s sport with a strong Chicago presence. 20
Women’s tennis attracted media attention for specific reasons—reasons that had little to do with athletic competence. “I think we got very interested in the personal side, you know, Chris Evert’s love life, the rumors about Martina,” Linda Kay said. “I don’t know that we got that caught up in like the personal side of Jimmy Connors or John McEnroe or Bjorn Bork as much as like the girls.” In fact, even in the process of remembering, sports journalists referenced athletes’ personal lives. Observing that “the women’s tennis tournament, the US Open [women’s competition], I think was much more interesting than the men,” Conklin mentioned Martina Navratilova by name, but then proceeded to refer to Chris Evert as “what’s her name, the one that married Jimmy Connors, and that married that tennis guy, the other tennis guy, you know from Florida.” When sports journalists recalled women’s tennis, they rarely mentioned athletic accomplishments.

Sports journalists who covered tennis reported on the tournaments, the matches, the athletes’ style of play, but these elements appeared less important as they remembered their work. Echoing on the appeal of the personal side, Kay said that she was most attracted to writing about individual-sport athletes’ personalities. “It was the dynamics of the person, who the person was, how they interacted with their teammates, with their family. That was interesting to me.” Kay added, “I liked doing profiles.” In covering both men’s and women’s tennis, Kay wrote game stories as well as profiles, but she remembered profiles more vividly.21

Women’s tennis presented itself as a fruitful site to write profiles about athletes. Several of Kay’s articles reflect this focus. For instance, Kay wrote about the 15-year-old Andrea Yaeger’s attitude toward schoolwork, experiences with injuries, relationship with
her father, friendship with Chris Evert’s little sister, and alleged crush on Evert’s husband. In the case of more mature players, Kay wrote about players’ love life.\textsuperscript{22}

An article about Evert’s appearance at the 1988 Virginia Slims Circuit in Chicago illustrates how journalists, in this case Kay, wrote about players’ love lives. Kay’s article titled “A happy Evert says she hasn’t reached the end of the trail yet, begins with introducing Evert’s husband, former Olympic skier Andy Mill, whom she met through Martina Navratilova. Kay wrote that Evert arrived to Chicago for the tournament “about to embark on a new chapter in her personal life and about to bring a long chapter in her professional life to close.” In response to speculations about her retirement Evert told the\textit{Tribune},

\begin{quote}
If I was losing all the time, or if I was constantly injured, it would be different. But I’ve got Andy [husband] now, and he’s at my side, and the money is just incredible. The only thing I would really like to have is a child.
\end{quote}

Situating Evert’s comments relation to her career, the article stated “It was rumored in the early 1980s that Evert might leave the tour—at least temporarily—to have a baby with her first husband, John Lloyd” and proceeded to quote Evert on how she felt about her first marriage and how she felt now. Kay’s often included hints about husbands or boyfriends, though she did not always display players’ love lives so prominently.\textsuperscript{23}

Kay’s approach to cover “athletes as human beings” translated into her coverage of other tennis players whereby the articles conveyed a personal side of the athlete. Although Kay wrote many game stories throughout her career “because you had to pay your dues and do it,” she saw her strength in writing profiles. As the articles illustrate, Kay wrote about athletes’ personal lives, about their relationships with family members
and with spouses. She sought to understand “how [athletes] operated in that competitive
realm.”

But Kay did not apply the same standard to covering athletes who had female
partners, most notably Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova. In fact, a few months
after King’s relationship with Marilyn Barnett became public, Kay wrote a feature story
about King’s marriage with Larry King in which she briefly mentioned that “For Billie
Jean, 1981 was a horror. Marilyn Barnett, Billie Jean’s one time lover, filed a ‘palimony’
suit against the tennis star, and Billie Jean went public with the details of the affair.”
Otherwise, the article titled “He’s the King of Their Courtship Nobody Knows” focused
on Larry King’s contributions to the women’s tour and, to a lesser extent, on Billie Jean
King’s involvement in World Team Tennis. At the same time, in articles about
Navratilova I found no reference to her relationship with Nancy Lieberman, which
likewise became public in 1981.

When asked about the main issues in women’s sport, Kay explained that female
athletes faced a stigma of lesbianism. “The problem was that a lot of them were perceived
to be gay,” Kay remembered. “I know that [perception] probably was really hard for
them. They had to really combat an image.” When I asked Kay if she ever talked to
female athletes about their sexuality she said that she “didn’t go there.” She remembered
that “men sportswriters” and “men in general” had “that underlying feeling” that female
athletes were gay and would inquire about it, but she would focus “on their skills and on
their life” and “didn’t care about their sexual orientation.” Putting it simply, Kay said “I
didn’t want to bring it up with them because, you know, it wasn’t my business.” Based on
some of the articles, it appears that Kay made straight openly straight athletes’ sexual orientation visible, but kept non-conforming athletes’ sexuality invisible.  

Kay was not the only journalist who remembered that female athletes experienced a tension between gender norms and athleticism. Sports journalists who covered sports coded as “masculine” (or in other words, associated with men and men’s gender performance) observed similar contestations. These contestations, as I illustrate, appeared prominently in their articles in the *Tribune*.

**A “Normal-Looking” Team: The Chicago Hustle**

On December 9, 1978, the Chicago Hustle traveled to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to face the Milwaukee Does in the opening game of the Women’s Professional Basketball League (WPBL). With a 92-87 victory in front of 7,824 spectators, the Hustle started on a good note. In its first season, the team drew an average of 2,000 fans to DePaul University’s Alumni Hall in Lincoln Park, Chicago, and became known throughout the three years of the WPBL’s existence as one of the most successful and most consistent franchises in the league.  

The editors and journalists remembered the Hustle as “a change,” a “kind of a novelty.” Krause claimed that the *Tribune* “took [the Hustle] pretty seriously,” adding, “probably [because] it was something different.” Mike Conklin remembered the team as “probably the first big splash” in women’s sports. “When the Hustle came as a professional basketball franchise, it was exciting,” Conklin said. Skip Myslenski, who traveled with the team occasionally and wrote several magazine-length feature articles
found the Hustle important. “You have a group that’s fighting the odds and you know what the odds are,” Myslenski said referring to the league’s struggles for acceptance and resources. “That’s a story, isn’t it? You know that’s a story.” The home team in the first professional women’s basketball league called for coverage.

In order to gain acceptance, the team needed to have support from prominent men in the Chicago sport landscape. Sports journalists cited the team’s head coach Doug Bruno as one main reason for why the Hustle received coverage. Before taking the Hustle job, Bruno already established a reputation in Chicago’s sports landscape as DePaul University’s women’s basketball head coach and assistant athletic director. Sports journalists referenced Bruno’s reputation. “We cared because Doug Bruno was involved and he brought instant credibility to the team,” Krause said. “If this was something that Doug Bruno was going to sign on to then by God we were going to pay attention to it, because he was somebody to be taken seriously.” Bruno was, as Conklin remembered, “the perfect coach for that, too:” With connections in the sports world, the “young and energetic” Bruno “added more credibility” to the team. Conklin added said that sports editors who were “remotely aware of people like Doug Bruno” tended to, as a result, shift in their perceptions about women’s sports. Reflecting on his coverage of the Hustle Myslenski pondered, “I knew Doug Bruno. Maybe that was one of the reasons I was draw to [the Hustle]. He was just a good guy.” Sports journalists remembered the Tribune’s initial interest in the Hustle and their attention to Doug Bruno.28

Several Tribune journalists wrote game stories about the Hustle throughout the years, but the paper displayed Skip Myslenski’s lengthy feature stories most prominently. In the team’s first season, Myslenski wrote a two-part series about the Hustle and its early
struggles. Drawing upon his background in magazine-style writing, Myslenski wrote about how the men leading the team (e.g., president, team investor, etc.) felt about the team and, specifically, about women’s basketball. For instance, Myslenski quoted public relations director Chuck Shriver, who presumably responding to the question of why he took the job, saying “It’s a strange answer to why I did take it. It was easier than expected.” After explaining that at one point he wanted to quit sports, Shriver added,

I had the bug, and my wife’s a career woman who liked the idea of women having their own league. The whole idea just sounded intriguing. It’s hard to put my finger on. But it sounded like fun, and it sounded like something that should go.  

Journalists’ memories and the articles indicate that in its initial launch, the league needed the endorsement of male managers and coaches.

The articles, further, open a window into contemporary tensions about gender and athleticism. Myslenski included players’ voices, most prominently the opinions of Karen Logan who both played for the team and served as assistant coach. Logan described the Hustle’s recruitment process as follows, “What I was trying to do is get a healthy, normal atmosphere,” Logan said for the Tribune. “We have a fairly normal-looking, decent-looking team. We could be basketball players or we couldn’t be basketball players. All the girls have feminine qualities about them. None of us look like men.” To look “normal” meant to adhere to ideals of womanhood, to minimize, or completely eliminate any sign of masculinity and, by extension, lesbianism.

Placing her attitude within the context of the sport, Logan told Myslenski “I worried about the image because I knew we were invading a men’s domain.” Thus, for the Hustle sought to have “people on this team who are secure both as women and as
athletes” because that would give them “credibility” in the society. And the team took measures to achieve this goal. “We mock the jock image on this team,” Logan assured Myslenski. “On the road we see athletes who look masculine, we make fun of them. It’s a passive joke among us, something we don’t relate to. It’s no problem for us.” According to Logan’s logic, in order to gain cultural acceptance (read: men’s acceptance) while competing in a masculine domain (basketball), women needed to affirm their traditional femininity so as to not threaten men’s dominance. The Hustle did so at the expense of marginalizing, stigmatizing and excluding athletes who did not fit the ideal.30

The articles, and Logan’s quotes specifically, brought light to the issue that women who played in sports coded as masculine (as opposed to sports such as tennis that tend to be coded as gender-neutral for allowing athletes to adhere to acceptable gender norms) faced more pressure to emphasize femininity. But instead of advocating for an abolition of these sexist and homophobic attitudes, Logan reinforced and justified them. In contrasting basketball and tennis, Logan argued,

I worried about the image because I knew we were invading a man’s domain. That’s where Billie Jean King and I disagree. Her philosophy is that we’re equal, we have a right to be anything we want and people can accept it or leave it. But she was in an accepted sport; people said it was fine for women to play tennis. But we’re in a new sport and we have to play by the rules that will sell that sport.31

To sell the sport, Logan suggested, women’s basketball players needed to adhere to rules—rules of acceptable gender norms.

Reflecting upon the time period and upon his articles about women’s sport, Myslenski hinted at the above described 1970s attitudes toward women’s athleticism. “Women don’t sweat, they glow,” Myslenski said. “That was a saying [in the old days].”
He remembered that female athletes “didn’t want to be seen as a jock.” He added, “they struggled with…I don’t know if they struggled, I can’t put myself in their shoes, but they were certainly made aware” of the tensions between womanhood and athleticism. By the 1980s, Myslenski said he heard female athletes say that the “environment didn’t matter by then,” but that “probably through the ‘70s, it was an issue to some women on how they were perceived.” Myslenski’s memories and his articles suggested that female athletes worried about violating cultural norms.32

Sports journalists remembered a sense of excitement about the Hustle and that a coach with an established reputation could bring credibility to the team. Myslenski, who wrote lengthy feature stories during several of the Hustle’s seasons, also remembered that female athletes struggled with acceptance during that time. His articles, and especially players’ quotes in these articles, illustrate the type of coverage the Tribune readers received.

As important as I find it to highlight the memories of those sports journalists who remembered the Hustle, it is also important to include those who did not. Even though Linda Kay wrote extensively about the Hustle during the 1981-1982 season, she did not mention the team in the interview. In fact, when I asked Kay what she remembered about the Hustle, she responded, “Not much, I hate to tell you. I remember asking one of the Hustle players to teach me how to play basketball.” With a laugh, she added, “And it was such a failure. I was so bad.” Kay had no memory of the team other than this personal interaction. As I illustrate in the subsequent sections, personal interactions with athletes stayed with journalists. These personal interactions shaped the way sports journalists wrote about women’s sports.
A Local Hero: Lisa Ishikawa

Although intercollegiate-level softball players typically did not receive local media attention and let alone national media attention, at least one athlete in the mid-1980s defied this pattern. Lisa Ishikawa a pitcher at Northwestern University became a media sensation in the spring of 1984 during her freshman season. As a Californian, she was one of the few players on the Northwestern team who did not hail from the mid-West; she was also the only Asian-American player. Her exceptional pitching, once resulting in 20 strike-outs in a single game, led the Wildcats to the NCAA tournament. Ishikawa did not become a historical figure in women’s sport like others I write about in this chapter. But she merits mention because Tribune sports journalists remembered her—and related to her.

Responding to the question of whether he remembered any outstanding Chicago athletes during his time of writing for the Tribune, Mike Conklin said “Yeah, there was a softball pitcher at Northwestern by the name of Lisa Ishikawa…She was like lights out as an athlete.” Although Conklin did not cover Ishikawa, he was interested in softball and followed closely the Tribune’s coverage of the pitcher. “Now, she didn't get a lot of publicity, but, you know, we covered her,” Conklin explained. “I mean you know we had two and three paragraph stories and stuff whenever she pitched because I think what was so impressive about that was the statistics were so phenomenal.” Remembering that it was “startling to see” such athletic performance, Conklin said that stories such as Ishikawa’s “sort of helped build credibility” for women’s sport.
Echoing his colleagues’ assertion that television shaped newspapers’ sports coverage, Bob Sakamoto attributed the Tribune’s coverage of Ishikawa to competition between media outlets, “In journalism, a lot of decisions both in print and TV broadcast media are driven by competitors.” He explained,

So when Lisa Ishikawa started appearing on the ten o’clock news almost every night because she was doing so well, and both the Cubs and White Sox were horrible in those year, that forced newspapers to actually start to cover her because television was doing that. And television did it because it was a novelty.

But Sakamoto did not feel forced to cover Ishikawa. He had already written extensively about girls’ and women’s interscholastic sports at the Suburban Tribune and continued to cover softball at the Tribune.33

Sakamoto remembered Ishikawa for reasons beyond her athletic ability. Ishikawa, according to Sakamoto, was very feminine. Recounting vivid images of Ishikawa, Sakamoto said,

She was one of the few female athletes that I knew worried more about how her nails looked than how her pitches looked…She painted her nails before every game to match her uniform to match her headband and everything else…She was very feminine. She was a very girly girl. She loved shopping and everything else. And she never let that go.

Further describing how he perceived Ishikawa’s gender performance, Sakamoto added “She wanted to make sure that people knew she was a softball player, but a female softball player and she was like proud of that.” In Sakamoto’s memory, Ishikawa did not fit the imaginary model of a female athlete in size and physique, “She was walking down the street, she was 5’ 4” and maybe a 120 pounds. You’d never think she was an athlete at all.”34
Although most of Sakamoto’s articles about Ishikawa were game reports and focused on her pitching, one feature story conveyed the same image that Sakamoto drew about the athlete. Additional to descriptions of Ishikawa’s athleticism, such as “Northwestern’s flame-thrower” and “brightest star to burst upon Northwestern’s athletic horizon,” the article also included the following paragraph:

Her walk to the mound has the grace of the ballerina she once was. Going to the resin bag means a near-curtsey that culminates in two fingers brushing daintily against the white powder. With fingernails carefully polished, hair in place, uniform neat and clean, Northwestern University pitcher Lisa Ishikawa would seem more comfortable at Marshall Field’s than on a softball field.

Quotes from Ishikawa provided further insight into her feminine attributes. “I’ve always been told I don’t look like an athlete,” Ishikawa told Sakamoto for the Tribune. “A lot of people have stereotyped softball players as someone who looks like a guy, chews tobacco and has a real deep voice.” Ishikawa said that although she loved softball, she preferred shopping to playing sports. In her words, she did not “like to get dirty.” Distancing herself from contemporary images of female athletes, and softball players in particular, she said, “I guess I’m a part of a new breed. There are a lot of younger girls out there who look more like my type.” This feature story, similar to Sakamoto’s memories, conveyed that Ishikawa was a feminine athlete.

Sakamoto focused on yet another aspect of Ishikawa’s identity—one that appeared so subtly in the articles that readers might not have detected—namely, Ishikawa’s cultural background. Sakamoto, the only Asian-American journalist in the Tribune’s sports department, shared cultural values with Ishikawa, an Asian-American athlete. “It was easy to establish a quick connection,” Sakamoto remembered. Ishikawa’s
parents were Japanese and Chinese. Sakamoto’s parents were both Japanese-American. In the interview, Sakamoto talked about historical roots of racial relations in the US through his family’s story. “My mother was put in a camp during World War II because she was of Japanese descent, whereas my father was fighting for America because he was from Hawaii,” Sakamoto said. “So it was just a weird kind of thing.”

While interviewing Ishikawa, Sakamoto noticed similarities in their background and upbringing. “Her dad worked with her really hard just the way my dad would make me rewrite writing assignments four or five times till I got it right,” Sakamoto remembered. “She would have to make the same pitching assignments over and over until [she] got it right…We would exchange stories about that.” In the article, Sakamoto hinted at the Ishikawa’s relationship with her father when he wrote, “Long hours of work with her father resulted in the deadly riseball that has become her money pitch.” As he remembered these stories, Sakamoto said he “wanted to describe her more than just an athlete, but as a person of Japanese culture.” Though the readers might not have attributed Ishikawa’s upbringing to her cultural background, Sakamoto did.

Sakamoto’s memories of Ishikawa convey less about her pitching performance, though he certainly remembered her as an excellent athlete, and more about the cultural connection the journalist built with the athlete. He remembered Ishikawa’s femininity and the way she conducted herself on the field as a female athlete. But in his memories of Ishikawa, Sakamoto also told stories about his relationship with his father—a personal experience through which he related to the athlete. This story is, thus, not just about a prominent female athlete who temporarily received (minimal) coverage on the *Tribune*
pages, but about those human impressions and sentiments that may not appear on the
sports pages.

**Conclusion**

In the 1970s and 1980s, women achieved noteworthy success in elite-level
competition. Histories of women’s sport have, to a varying degree, documented these
athletes and events. Olga Korbut and Nadia Comaneci’s athletic perfection, Billie Jean
King’s activism, Chris Evert’s consecutive Grand Slam titles, Martina Navratilova’s
career record, and the Hustle’s mere existence live in women’s sport histories as defining
figures in social change.

Sports journalists’ memories and their select articles reveals several trends about
this time in the history of sport and sports journalism. First, sports journalists cited
television’s impact upon both in what they covered and in how they covered sports. The
articles referenced television’s agenda and reproduced its gendered tropes. While sport
historians and sports media scholars have long declared the ubiquity of television in
sport—and especially television’s power in the Olympic industry—sports journalists’
memories provide insight into how the “complementary relationship” between television
and newspapers played out in relation to women’s coverage.38

Sports that exalted femininity appeared prominently and gender ideologies,
regardless of sport, permeated coverage. Across memories and coverage, an overarching
theme that female athletes struggled with negotiating womanhood with emerged. This
does not mean that female athletes did struggle. To find that out, I would have had to talk
to the athletes. Journalists, who might have carried their own (and dominant culture’s) stereotypes regarding gender, might have asked questions probing how athletes negotiated womanhood and athleticism in a way that implied a preconceived conflict. Because with their athleticism, fitness, and muscularity female athletes challenged “traditional conceptions of femininity,” they also challenged (to varying extent) sport’s association with masculinity. But media representations, as sport sociologist Michael Messner observed in 1988 and as I find here, ultimately did not disrupt male dominance. Instead, these representations maintained distracted from women’s accomplishments, perpetuated heterosexuality, and stigmatized non-conforming (read: non-heterofeminine) gender performance. Not only did these representations maintain existing hierarchies of gender, but they also further marginalized female athletes who did not display desired feminine qualities in conjunction with their athleticism.39

Journalists’ memories about which sports received coverage and why are, in many ways, consistent with how feminist sport scholarships describes dominant gender ideologies in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1989, reflecting upon the previous two decades, sport sociologist Mary Jo Kane noted that mainstream media privileged those sports that allowed women to appear in socially acceptable roles. In other words, female athletes had to participate in “non-manly” sports and display feminine qualities. The media also overemphasized heterosexuality while erasing the experiences of potentially lesbian or bisexual athletes. Even though these themes applied to the coverage of all four sports in this chapter (gymnastics, tennis, basketball, and softball), notably differences emerged in how journalists wrote about the athletes in individual versus team sports. While in gymnastics and tennis women neatly and perhaps somewhat “naturally” combined
athletic competence with femininity, basketball, and softball athletes suggested that they needed to constrain their own athleticism or further up-play their femininity to appeal to audiences. The articles about basketball and softball very clearly articulated what a female athlete should not be (i.e., not look like men, not be a jock, not have a deep voice, etc.). Although these representations may challenge the idea that athleticism must contain masculine attributes, they maintain rigid ideas about what “normal” for female athletes should look like.40

The general themes in articles may be consistent with existing scholarship, but journalists’ recollections of these historical events in women’s sport provide valuable insight into the everyday practices of reporting, the personal relationships they developed with the athletes, and the cultural norms that they as media practitioners negotiated. In reflecting upon the major events and noteworthy athletes of the time period, journalists told stories about personal relationships with their sources. These connections (i.e., with a coach who was a “good guy” or with an athlete who had a similar cultural background) did not only leave a lasting memory for the journalists, but also, as the articles suggest, seeped into media coverage.

By relying on sports journalists’ accounts to interpret media coverage, this chapter offers multi-dimensional stories about the sports and athletes at the center of the analysis. Consistently with many of the articles about female athletes, sports journalists more prominently remembered the personal elements about female athletes, such as their love lives and their appearance. In fact, in the interviews, few journalists referenced these athletes’ accomplishments or contributions to women in sport. None of them, for instance, talked about Olga Korbut or Nadia Comaneci’s significance for the actual sport
of gymnastics, or about Billie Jean King’s activism, or Chris Evert’s and Martina Navratilova’s countless Grand Slam Titles, or the Hustle’s success in the newly formed professional league, for that matter. They did rave about Lisa Ishikawa’s pitching excellent and, thereby, brought light to an athlete who did not gain national prominence, but contributed to the visibility of women in sport in a local media environment.

Ultimately, the coverage of elite-level women’s sport remained isolated. The Olympics happened every four and later every two years and lasted for only two weeks at a time. The major tennis tournaments likewise gained coverage only over a two-week time period about three or four times a year. The Women’s Professional Basketball League (WPBL) folded after three years and the new subsequent leagues continued to struggle with media attention. Lisa Ishikawa eventually graduated. The problem with this coverage lies in its lack of permanence. Sports departments did not drastically change their priorities in response to the emergence of women’s elite level competition. These journalists, who provided somewhat regular though sporadic coverage of women’s sports mostly worked on other, men’s, beats. Thus, even though elite-level women’s sport garnered some attention, sports journalists made no indication that these instances left a lasting impact upon sports departments’ attitudes and approach toward women on the sports pages. In fact, the so few articles perpetuated rigid gender stereotypes, minimizing female athletes’ empowerment.

Notes


8 Boutilier and SanGiovanni, *The Sporting Woman*. Susan Ware Game, *Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women’s Sports*, University of Nebraska Press, 1.


14 Myslenski interview.

15 Myslenski interview. Hersh interview. Beyond television’s role in shaping coverage, the journalists also lamented on television’s intrusiveness in the locker rooms and upon access to athletes. Linda Kay said that when television stations started buying access talking to athletes became much more difficult. Linda Kay, interview with the author, August 5, 2014, Montreal, Canada.


Kay, interview. This approach transferred into her coverage of both men and women, though here I discuss her women’s tennis coverage only. For instance, in an article about Ed Flori, a golfer, Kay began the article by writing “First came the brand new baby, then the brand new house, then the brand new injury.” She continued to talk about the ways in which the golfer adjusted his lifestyle to a married life and to having a child. Linda Kay, “Last Year’s Champ Ready to Go Again,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 27, 1982, O3.

Linda Kay, “Andrea will Stay the Course,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 15, 1983, C1. See also, Linda Kay, “Chicago is Martina’s Kind of Town,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 13, 1983, C6. Kay similar wrote about other players’ husbands and boyfriends. For example, in a feature article about Tracy Austin, one of Jaeger’s rivals, Kay wrote, “Concentration always wasn’t Tracy’s strong suit, but there are other things now that detract from her single-minded pursuit of tennis. When she was off the circuit nursing her back, Tracy had the chance to look around.” By looking around, Austin found a boyfriend. “She fell in love,” Kay wrote. “He’s Matt Anger, a top-flight amateur player who majors in business at the University of Southern California.” Linda Kay, “Austin’s Life a bit Tougher, a Lot Better,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 1983, D1.


Kay interview.


Kay interview.

The eight teams in the league’s inaugural season were the Chicago Hustle, the Dayton Roclettes, the Houston Angels, the Iowa Cornets, the Milwaukee Does, the Minnesota Fillies, the New Jersey Gems, and the New York Stars. For a detailed history of the WPBL, see Karen Porter, *Mad Seasons: The Story of the First Women’s Professional Basketball League, 1978-1981* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2006).

Krause interview. Conklin interview. Myslenski interview. Doug Bruno was neither the team’s first, nor its last coach. The team’s general manager frequently switched (and fired) coaches, but the journalists did not mention any other figure in relation to the Hustle aside from Bruno. One explanation for this may be that Bruno has since become an even more prominent figure in Chicago sports as, first Loyola University’s men’s basketball coach, and in the last few decades as DePaul University’s women’s basketball coach. Bruno also serves as an assistant coach for the national US women’s basketball team.
This article was the first in the series of two articles by Myslenski. Both articles began on the bottom third of page one in the Sunday and Monday issues and continued onto a full page inside the sports section. Photos accompanied both articles. Skip Myslenski, “Hustle Struggling to Beat Sexism,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 14, 1979, C1.


Myslenski interview.

Sakamoto served as a softball columnist for several years at the *Suburban Tribune*. Once he joined the *Tribune*, he continued to write about high school and college softball. While at the *Tribune*, Sakamoto received a national award for both the best feature and the best news story in women’s softball. Sakamoto interview.


Sakamoto interview.


Kane, “The Post Title IX Female Athlete in the Media.”
Chapter 7

Conclusion

In a 1989 article titled “The Post Title IX Female Athlete in the Media,” feminist sport sociologist Mary Jo Kane asks whether female athletes gained widespread social acceptance in the post-Title IX period. Starting with the assumption that patterns in media coverage of female athletes ought to have changed considering the “remarkable gains in women’s sport since the advent of the Women’s Movement and the passage of Title IX,” Kane argues that the all-pervasive mass media continued to perpetuate harmful stereotypes about women in sports, constraining them to rigidly defined gender roles. She concludes that despite the gains “we have not gained gender equality in sports.”

In light of the legislative, social, and cultural turns for women in sport in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars and advocates rightfully expected that coverage would change for the better. During these two decades, women joined athletic teams at educational institutions, competed in state-sanctioned championships, played in newly formed professional leagues, acquired sponsorship deals and became more important in serving the nation-state at international sporting events. These institutional changes accompanied cultural change whereby female athletes challenged—and to lesser extent transformed—norms about gender an athleticism. Although women broke many barriers in sport, newspapers missed the mark and failed to respond to these changes. As sports media scholar Marie Hardin and her colleagues argue, “although the media have both ethical and market-driven reasons to increase the quantity and quality of female sports coverage,
Building upon the scholarship that examines the relationship between gender, sport and media, I approached this dissertation with a goal to better understand the coverage of women’s sports of 1970s and the 1980s from the perspective of those who lived through this time period within one context, the Chicago sport/media market. I conducted oral history interviews with sports journalists who worked at newspapers because, as sociologist Michael Schudson argues, newspapers have been “the most representative carrier and construer and creator of modern public consciousness.” These sports journalists, all of whom either extensively wrote about women’s sports or, as editors, held decision-making power in relation to women’s sports coverage took an active role in the construction of gender and of sport, leaving a lasting mark on Chicago’s sporting past.

In this research, I positioned sports journalists’ voices at the center of historical inquiry. Their memories do not explain why women’s sports coverage changed so little since Title IX’s implementation, nor do they serve as factual evidence for the changes that did occur in terms of gender relations in sport media. Rather, these accounts provide insight into everyday realities as constructed through the act of remembering. By asking journalists to recall events in the past, the interviews allowed me to see previously undiscovered complications, inconsistencies, and tensions around women’s sports.

This dissertation’s primary contribution lies in presenting an in-depth account of how journalists interpreted historical trends in women’s sports coverage and in the history of women’s sport in the 1970s and 1980s. Journalists’ memories allow us to
consider significant moments from a more immediate, more intimate perspective than thus far documented. Oral history interviews, as feminist historian Sherna Gluck argues, “can be of great importance in expanding our knowledge and revising our historiography.” Recovering sports journalists’ lived experiences of the past, the past so crucial to women’s place in sport, helps us understand how these historical events affected—or contrary to the expectations did not affect—the way sports journalists remembered their work as journalists. Likewise it allows us to explore those moments of change in the history of women’s sports coverage that analyses of content and historical inquiries have not yet recovered.

Because sports journalists’ memories are intricately intertwined with larger social and cultural currents, this dissertation allowed me to explore an alternative narrative of the past. Sports journalists attributed historical importance to actors who shaped women’s sport history, but they also uncovered new ones. Their stories both overlapped and diverged from well-established historical narratives. Sports journalists remembered historically significant moments (i.e., Title IX, first women in the sports newsroom, the “Battle of Sexes,” the WPBL, Olga Korbut, etc.) in conflict ways depending on the newspaper, or journalists’ assignment, or time period. Some did not remember these events at all, others remembered them vividly attributing great value to them, yet others placed no significance to them upon the sports journalism industry. In recalling significant moments in the history of women’s sports coverage, journalists might have not remembered “major” historical moments, but they did remember in much detail very personal encounters—those that affected their lives most immediately. The value of this
research is both in how and what sports journalists remembered and in what they did not remember as significant in the transformations around gender and sport.

In the process of constructing a narrative of coverage of women’s sports based on sports journalists memories, each of the chapters in this dissertation urges me to reconsider points against which scholars have measured progress for women in sports media coverage. Chapter 3 introduces journalists (all men) through their narratives about upbringing, relationship to sport and path to sports journalism. In recalling their childhood memories, sports journalists attributed their interest in women’s sport to gender roles within their family and to early exposure to women’s sports spectatorship. They found immediate personal experiences (e.g., working mothers, athletic sisters) important in shaping how they viewed women’s sport. Sports journalists who entered the industry during Title IX’s implementation and its enforcement debates remembered Title IX, but attributed varying degrees of power to the law upon sports journalism. Notably, even if journalists attributed the growth of women’s sports to Title IX, they did not have any memory of Title IX changing their own attitudes about women’s sport. Title IX has given tremendous protection for girls and women in sport. Even though the law contributed to institutional change in educational programs, it did not, according to the journalists, carry practical consequences for the newspapers. No law demands that media outlets not discriminate based on sex and, clearly, journalists did not feel that they should jump on the bandwagon of enforcing equality in their own work. Chapter 3 raises more questions than it answers about what it would have taken for newspapers to incorporate women’s sports in the immediate post-Title IX period.
In light of women’s nationwide entrance into the sports journalism industry in the 1970s, Chapter 4 brings visibility to the “first” women in Chicago newspapers’ sports departments. This chapter explores women’s relationship to sport, women’s sports coverage, and feminism. Women’s articulations of attitudes toward women’s sports coverage mirrors those previously identified by feminist (sport) media scholars insofar as some women expressed a strong sense of advocacy of women’s sports coverage, while others distanced themselves from being considered a “women’s sports” writer. That said, all the women expressed a connection to feminism and feminist agendas and talked about a variety of ways in which they considered themselves (retrospectively) as advocates of women through their work as sports journalists.5

Following the theme of how sports journalists remembered moments of change in women’s sport, Chapter 5 considers the extended “moment” of gradual increase in participation opportunities post-Title IX. Based on sports journalists’ memories, coverage of women’s sports stood no chance in mirroring this increase. The tumult, which hit Chicago newspaper landscape in the 1970s and 1980s, stayed with sports journalists as they remembered their work at the papers. To reach readers who migrated to the suburbs, newspapers folded, merged, and emerged. These changes, as memories tell, affected sports journalists’ job security, their priorities in sports coverage, and their assignments, filtering into how sports departments viewed women’s sports coverage. Reflecting upon the time period, which scholars assessed as indicative of women’s social acceptance in sport, sports journalists told a far-from-progressive story in elaborating in detail about the market changes and industry norms in Chicago’s newspaper landscape. These
articulations reflect previously observed ways in which sports journalists justify the
exclusion of women and normalize men’s sports coverage.6

Finally, Chapter 6 takes a closer look at sports journalists’ memories of dominant
historical actors, both those teams and athletes who today live in popular imagination as
transformative figures in women’s sport and those who only had temporary local
significance. Sports journalists remembered athletes who were, even at that time,
prominent. However, considering that journalists covered these actors throughout their
careers, their memories lacked clarity or specificity. In contrast, sports journalists vividly
remembered stories they enjoyed covering or stories in which they made personal
connections with athletes. Notably, while they attributed the prominence of women’s
sports in coverage to “famous” actors such as Billie Jean King, they also identified local
standouts, such as softball pitcher Lisa Ishikawa, as key figures in contributing to the
visibility of women’s sports in Chicago media. Ultimately, regardless of the actors and
their contributions, female athletes only saw temporary exposure and only within rigidly
defined gender roles. Even so, memories reveal the pleasures and rewards sports
journalists felt in the process of covering women’s sports.

Comprehensively, in this dissertation I explored how personal accounts can add to
and even transform our understanding of the history of coverage of women’s sports. As a
feminist sports media scholar, I have struggled through a plethora of content analyses all
of which end in a depressing predicament: sports media continuously and relentlessly
undermine and trivialize female athletes. But I learned through the process of conducting
this research that content analyses alone, which often focuses on a select number of major
newspapers or magazines in major cities and on major sports, miss so much of what ought to be relevant to understand the past.

Oral history interviews with sports journalists urged me to begin feminist inquiry from sports journalists’ personal experience. This epistemic positioning allowed me to center how sports journalists remembered the everyday process of reporting, how they felt when they talked to sources, how they related to their editors, and, importantly, how they saw their role in relation to women’s sports. Sports journalists’ stories are particularly important for historical inquiry because they, as decision-makers and reporters, helped construct dominant ideas about gender and sport in Chicago through media. Unveiling complications that emerge from this new evidence rewrites history by making room for mundane moments that shaped coverage of women’s sports. This inquiry allowed to consider not only the moments that historians identify as “first” or “significant,” but also to recognize the moments that generally fall outside of these narratives yet remain so important for this small group of sports journalists—sports journalists who dedicated decades to covering women’s sports.

Sports journalists’ memories, as presented in this research, tell us that the histories we currently possess about women’s sports coverage are limited. As such, this dissertation points to several possibilities for future research. In terms of focus, feminist sports media scholarship could more comprehensive document of women’s participation in sport by expanding analyses beyond the sports pages of newspapers. For instance, in the Chicago Tribune men’s elite-level/professional sports gained more and more prominence during the 1970s, while women’s sports received a dreadful 4.1% of all stories. I would be curious to explore whether and how women’s sports appeared in other
sections of the paper. Sports journalists memories do not provide an understanding of what that coverage may have looked like, but they do at least direct scholars toward another line of inquiry. Although this quest may not challenge the problems inherent on the sports pages, it would help identify possibilities for a different, and perhaps better, coverage of women’s sports.7

Additionally, it would be important to extend the analysis beyond major national newspapers. While existing studies provide a general understanding of how major news media outlets cover women’s sports, research on how this coverage may differ in local papers with a different readership could grow further. For instance, reporters at the Arlington Heights Daily Herald implied that their coverage of girls’ and women’s sports was much more expansive than that of other papers considering the interests of the local community. Even though these papers did not have a national impact, for particular local communities they might have been the primary source of news. One line of inquiry might explore the differences (and presumably similarities) between papers with high circulation numbers within one market to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the type of women’s sports coverage that reached the city’s readers. These explorations might also direct us to focus in specifically on youth sport, which is yet to receive substantial attention from scholars. These are only a few of the many directions scholars could take in analyzing content for the purposes of better understanding trends in women’s sports coverage as well as the history of women’s sport.8

Subsequent historical inquiries could also turn to oral history interviews to examine coverage of women’s sport from the perspective of not only sports journalists, but other actors. For instance, recent sociological studies have asked female athletes to
interpret media coverage, asking how female athletes construct their social identities in relation to media texts. Similar, feminist scholars could conduct oral history interviews with female athletes who received coverage during that time period (for instance, the Chicago Hustle players) to ask what they remembered about their relationship to media and how they would interpret that coverage now. These inquiries could also expand to coaches, administrators and advocates who often pushed newspapers for more and better coverage.\(^9\)

To add to the recent work in media and memory, scholars could also build upon trajectories in girlhood studies that examine women’s memories of mass media and popular communication in their formative years. Oral history interviews could become important tools for understanding women’s experience in relation to media, in this case in relation to sports media content. As this dissertation illustrates, some of the women who later became sports journalists remembered listening to sports on the radio or reading about sports in the newspaper. Future studies could engage with women who did not become sports journalists to understand how women recall, what feminist media scholar Shayla Thiel-Stern and her colleagues called, their “girlhood engagement” with media—in this case, sports media.\(^10\)

Scholarship on the coverage of women’s sports has thus far greatly benefited from diversity in researchers’ disciplinary affiliations and backgrounds. The leading feminist sport scholars bring distinct perspectives based on their experiences as former athletes, coaches, sport industry professionals, and journalists. As feminist scholars we also recognize, though not always overtly, that our social locations matter in the way we ask questions, conduct our research, and interpret our findings. Our position as researchers
becomes even more important in the knowledge construction process when we conduct interviews, which are much more collaborative than, for instance, analysis of documents or media content. As feminist historian Sherna Gluck writes “The perspective of the interviewer cannot help but influence, even subtly, the content of the material—particularly what the interviewee will judge as ‘important.’” Our perspective, however efficiently we hide it, shapes the contributions we bring to efforts toward gender justice.¹¹

In fact, during several of the interviews I conducted it became apparent to me that my background as a (female) athlete influenced the way sports journalists talked about women’s sports. I am also certain that in my analysis of transcripts, based on my position as an outsider to the journalism industry and my non-US-centered perspective on sport, I omitted elements that other researchers would have detected. At the same time, I likely emphasized details that others might not have noted. Researchers’ subjectivities carry epistemic significance and I see that as an advantage. As such, I believe—as do many others—that scholarship on gender, sport, and media will continue to benefit from the variety of perspectives researchers bring to their inquiries.

As we move forward in feminist sports media research we write the story of feminism. In this quest, we build upon those who centered women’s experiences in sport, documented the pioneering work of women in sports journalism, and fought for gender justice in their research and activism. My own feminist intellectual engagement in this dissertation has been intimately intertwined with feminist scholarship across “waves,” across disciplines, and across paradigms. I sought out what feminist historian Eileen Boris called “usable pasts” in feminist theorizing, drawing upon feminist scholarship from as early as the 1960s up until the very recent publications. My search for “usable
pasts” resulted (I admit) less from a deliberate intention to weave feminist traditions together and more from my subtle yet firm commitment to cross-generational feminist dialogue. As feminist sport sociologist Jane Caudwell argues, the “process of folding in past and present can be limitless and boundless.” Rigorous engagement with feminist theorizing of the past defies linearity and opens up endless possibilities for the continuing struggle for gender justice.¹²

A few years ago seven feminist historians came together to write an essay with a purpose to unveil misconstrued and incomplete genealogies of feminism. Critiquing the “waves metaphor,” the article, as one of the authors Kathleen Laughlin puts, set out to “consider the consequences for the future of feminism in adhering to the metaphor that entrenches the notion that feminist politics only occurs in dramatic waves of revolutionary activism.” The article urges readers to, as Eileen Boris writes, “poke around in attics of the past, look under previously missed stones, and rehear voices long muted.” In feminist sports media scholarship we would be advised to look beyond narratives of major changes and celebrate those moments of resistance that may fall outside of well-established chronologies. When we do so, Boris eloquently says, “we pull together strands into a braid, connecting past and present, finding inspiration in those who have gone before, constructing genealogies of feminism for the future.” In this relatively new line of inquiry, we have much left to uncover, many more stones to lift, and new voices to hear. But in the last few decades feminist sports media scholars have also set a solid foundation upon which we can build—upon which we place our own bricks. In that work, we find inspiration.¹³
Notes


At the Olympic Games, women’s participation numbers saw a steady growth during the 20th century. Between 1972 and 1988, women’s events at the Summer Games jumped from 43 to 72, with women constituting 26.1% of all participants—a significant increase from 14.6%. See, International Olympic Committee, “Factsheet: Women in the Olympic Movement,” feminist.org, March 2003, accessed February 8, 2015.


7 Of course, we must consider the problem of ghettoization of women’s sports to separate spheres and whether that move actually disrupts the sports media complex (it doesn’t).


9 Mary Jo Kane, Nicole M. LaVoi and Janet S. Fink, “Exploring Elite Female Athletes’ Interpretations of Sport Media Images: A Window Into the Construction of Social Identity and ‘Selling Sex’ in Women’s Sports,” *Communication & Sport* (February 2013). DOI: 10.1177/2167479512473585. Vikki Krane, Sally R. Ross, Mintana Miller, Julie L. Rowse, Kristy...


11 Gluck, “What’s So Special about Women,” 6. For example, Bob Frisk said “you ladies should be proud of yourselves,” while Skip Myslenski said “you don’t sweat, you glow.”


Appendix

Interview Questions

Introduction: [Principal Investigator]: We are here with [name of participant] in [location]. Today is [today’s date], and we will be talking about [name of participant]’s experiences with covering women’s sports in Chicago. Let’s begin with an introduction. Where did you grow up? Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

What role did sports play in your life growing up?

What is your most vivid memory with sports?

When did you become interested in journalism?

What was your first job as a journalist?

How did you become a sports writer?

Tell me about your career as a journalist. Could you describe the major milestones in your career?

How would you characterize the environment in sports newsrooms in the 70s and 80s? What can you tell me about your typical work-day at the time? How would you describe your colleagues? How would you describe your relationship with your editor?

You wrote a number of stories about women’s sports in Chicago. How did you come about to write these stories? Did you choose them? Were you specifically assigned to women’s sports?

How did your colleagues and editor view women’s sports? Did they believe women’s sports were important to cover?

Can you recall a particularly memorable story you covered? Why did it stand out to you?

What was going on in the Chicago sports world in the 1970’s and 1980’s that you can remember?

What do you know about Title IX?

Were you aware of any organizing or changes in women’s sports at the time when you covered sports? Did these changes influence what you wrote about?

What were some of the news values that guided your decision in what to write about?
How did you see your role as a journalist covering women’s sports? Did you feel like you have the responsibility to promote women’s sports, or did advocacy conflict with your journalistic ideals?

What do you think are the main issues that women’s sports face in media?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this interview. You can expect an email from me in a few months in which you will be given the option to review the interview transcript for accuracy.
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