Present Status of Women in Professional Athletics

Debra Gaber

Indiana University School of Law, dgaber@ptd.net

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Present Status of Women in Professional Athletics

Debra Gaber

If a female decides to turn professional in the sports world, she will undoubtedly find that regardless of her outstanding ability and past victories, she will not have many opportunities or many places to go. Compared with male athletes, females are restricted in terms of opportunities, and receive far less recognition and pay. Lack of opportunity exists for a number of reasons. Athletics have traditionally been viewed as an area properly designated for men only. Sports breed, so the men say, discipline, character, aggressiveness, as well as healthy muscular bodies. Frequently men say they do not appreciate aggressive or muscular women.

These attitudes in men inevitably affect the amount and kind of support they give female athletes. Collectively, the tendency is to discourage women from going into athletics. Often verbal attack or mediocre athletic programs for women discourage those few who would want to seriously pursue this field of endeavor.

All the years that young male athletes, with potential, are being groomed for the junior, senior high and college varsity teams, and while some are given special training for the Olympics, women are left out in the cold. They are literally “scheduled-out” of using their school's athletic facilities. Only a few high schools across the country have women's varsity teams, and early training is crucial for a successful professional career in sports. In the entire states of Utah and Nevada there are no interscholastic sports for girls at all.

The following statistics illustrate the inequality that exists in girls' high school athletic programs. One Pennsylvania school district had an athletic budget which totaled $19,880 for 1972-1973. The boys got $19,420 and the girls got $460.¹ In Syracuse, New York, the athletic budget one year

¹ Ms. Gaber, a second year Indiana University law student, received her A.B. and M.A. in Religion from Indiana University. She is also a professional folksinger and songwriter.
was $90,000 for boys and $200 for girls. The following year when the budget was cut back the girls’ money was eliminated and the boys got $18,700.  

Unlike men, very few women who maintain their interest in sports through high school are drawn to colleges because of their athletic ability. As many as 50,000 men a year earn a college education by holding an athletic scholarship. Presently, fewer than 50 women do so.3 Until last year, the Intercollegiate Athletics for Women Association barred women who held scholarships from participating in its events because they thought athletic scholarships had a bad influence on college sports.4 “Compared to men, the opportunity for women to be supported while competing in athletics after high school is almost non-existent.”5

Good male athletes receive substantial scholarships to attend prestigious schools. Men train and practice without having to worry about earning their way through college.

Most colleges do not offer the number of intercollegiate sports for women that are offered to men. Restricted opportunities to compete can be evidenced by the fact that at the Olympics, no women will be seen competing in archery, basketball, weight lifting, cycling, boxing, equestrian, field hockey, judo, modern pentathlon, rowing, soccer, shooting, team handball, water polo, wrestling, and yachting.6

If a woman happens to be skilled in a sport with opportunities for competition, the professional female athlete will soon find out that the relatively high paying sports such as golf, tennis, horse racing, and bowling offer far less money to women than to men. The difference in earnings between male and female professionals is embarrassingly high.

In 1971, Billie Jean King earned about $100,000 while Rod Laver made $290,000.7 When Ms. King won the open at Forest Hills in the women’s singles she earned $10,000. Illie Nastase won the men’s singles and earned $25,000.8 Billie Jean picked up $4,830 for winning Wimbledon in 1972 whereas Stan Smith earned $12,150.

In professional golf, the earning differential becomes even more pronounced. Jack Nicklaus made $320,542 last year. He played 19 tournaments. Kathy Whitworth, the Ladies Pro Golf top winner, earned about $64,063 in 29 tournaments.9 Among the lesser competitors the difference in earnings is even more distressing. The fifteenth leading money winner for the women earned $18,901.10 The most a woman ever earned at one golf event was $20,000 at the Dinah Shore Colgate Winners Golf Tour.11 Male golfers often compete for twice that much at one event on a regular pro circuit tour.

The following chart illustrates some of the differences in earnings between male and female pros.

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<th>Top Earnings—1971</th>
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<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
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<td>Tennis:</td>
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<td>Golf:</td>
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Fortunately, female pros are earning much more now than a few years ago. In 1968 female tennis pros competed for less than $75,000. In 1972 they competed for $700,000 in prize earnings. In 1971, 21 golf tournaments brought in $650,000 worth of prize money for women. In 1972, 29 tournaments brought in $950,000. In bowling, the maximum prize money for women was $96,000. In 1972 it was $250,000. Even though women are earning more than before, they do not earn nearly as much as male pros do.

The unequal pay issue aggravates and frustrates many female pro athletes but only a very few have been outspoken about it. Part of the problem is that many of these women feel the reason that their purses are low is because they are not drawing the large crowds that men do. Athletes, like entertainers, are dependent on their drawing power. Even though the amount of the purse is not based totally on gate receipts, the size of the crowd is a very important factor in determining how much money a sponsor will put up for prize money. Once the athlete draws a crowd the rest will follow. When female tennis pros demonstrated they could draw the crowds that men were drawing sponsors soon made themselves available for upcoming women's events. Ban deodorant offered to put up enough money to make the women's prize earnings equal to the men's at the U.S. Open at Forest Hills.

Most female athletes do not feel they have reason to complain about their earnings unless they are drawing crowds. Billie Jean King says, "If we don't draw well, we shouldn't be paid as much." However, she is angry that the purses remain disparate while women continue to draw huge crowds. Ms. King states:

We do not want equal pay for equal work...we only want what we're worth. For two years we've outdrawn the men at Forest Hills by whatever criteria they've used, but this year the men's money was 2½ times the women's and at Wimbledon it is twice as much even though I know we draw at least as many people there as the men do every year.

It is difficult to gauge how many spectators come specifically to see men or women compete. Frequently, people comment that fans would not turn out for female events. This simply is not true.

The first tennis tournament organized by Women's LOB in conjunction with Gladys Heldman, publisher of World Tennis, drew enormous crowds in Houston, Texas. The sponsor (Virginia Slims) decided to donate extra prize money and guaranteed the tournament would be held the following year. The tour has become known as the Virginia Slims Tournament. As of 1971, $240,000 in prize money was offered.

This year's Wimbledon matches were a good indication of the truth of Ms. King's previous statement. Due to WTC's (World Championship Tennis) boycott of Wimbledon, 72 top male pros did not play. Without all of these great players competing, Wimbledon drew the greatest crowds since its inception. People were coming to see women play. The decision to give the women equal prize money at Forest Hills was made by sponsors shortly
after Wimbledon.

In the roller derby "it is the women more than the men, who attract and generate publicity, yet the female stars of the derby make $25,000 to $30,000 a year and the men who play to the same crowds earn larger salaries. A typical novice in the derby will start at a salary of $85 a week plus travel and their salaries soon grow. By the time a man is earning $200-250 a week, a woman of equal talent is getting $150.15

Certain women’s events consistently draw small crowds. The explanation for this consists of a number of factors. It is not simply that people are not interested in seeing women play. One major reason for low attendance is due to lack of publicity and coverage of the event. Sponsors who do the advertising do not back women’s events as they do men’s events. They feel they do better financially if they back men’s events. This is because they are sure there will be spectators in great numbers at men’s events. Sponsors go where the crowds go. But, good coverage sparks interest and attendance. Sponsors know this. Unless they give an event good coverage it won’t draw much attention.

Peggy Fleming and Billie Jean King are extremely popular because they haven gotten good coverage. Sponsors know people will come to see them perform, but unfortunately most female athletes do not get this kind of coverage. A look at the amount of coverage presently offered by the T.V. networks for live sport indicates the gross inequality in the amount of coverage given to women. Of 366 hours of live sports shown on NBC between August, 1972 and September, 1973, only one hour was devoted to women.17 Of 260 hours of live sports shown on CBS, ten hours were devoted to women.18 A television program like “ABC’s Wide World of Sports” is viewed by thousands of people. Television is perhaps the most significant medium by which sports are brought to the American public. Rarely are women’s events covered. How can sponsors expect people to be interested in women’s events if the public never sees them?

Another factor which affects attendance is the amount of the purse the athletes are competing for. Usually an event paying a high purse will draw a lot of people. This is because top athletes usually compete for the high purses and the size of the purse adds a little bit of excitement to the game. Sportswriter-journalist Karol Stonger, who works for UPI in New York City, said, “If the purse is $100,000 people will watch. As purses go up, so will attendance.” The King-Riggs match displayed the best of all worlds—it had a very high purse and about the best publicity even given to a sports event. But again, the purse is only one factor. Wimbledon does not pay a high purse yet thousands of people watched it. It is hard to explain just why a person goes to watch an event. Although the size of the purse is only one of many factors, it should nevertheless be considered. Purses are generally low for female pros. Sponsors, who offer the purse, are fearful of backing women’s events because of the attendance problem.

An explanation frequently offered why women are not paid the same is
because of the commonly held view that women are not as good as men and therefore should not be paid equally. Thus, even if women are drawing record crowds, they still “do not deserve” to earn the same as men. According to this view, pay equality is contingent upon how well you compete against any athlete of either sex rather than how well you compete within the limitations of each physical type. If sheer physical power is the criteria for what makes the best athlete, women are sure to remain second class citizens. In sports such as basketball, tennis, swimming, etc. the strength and height of a male would put women at an enormous disadvantage. Even in sports such as gymnastics and diving or downhill racing or speedskating, strength can be an important factor. In diving, for example, it takes a greater amount of spring off the board to execute difficult dives. Points awarded a diver are based, in part, on the degree of difficulty. It would be difficult for women to compete against men.

The fairest standard in judging excellence should be to examine individual ability within each sex. What is important is that the job can be done and it can be done well. Women do not necessarily have to “beat” a man to prove they can do the job:

Most women are at a disadvantage when competing with men but this is not a sufficient reason to pay them less. . .[t]o anyone who even once has viewed women participating in a roller derby, the argument that women are the weaker sex, desirous of only the more genteel work carries little weight. The success for women jockeys is further evidence of which we take notice. . .some women have the desire, ability and stamina to do any work that men can do.”


Certainly in factory jobs, where men and women earn the same wage per hour, it is conceivable that a man is physically capable of doing more than a woman, yet he is paid the same because, given the job, more is not required. The highest hourly wage does not go to the strongest person on the assembly line. The wage is standardized depending on the difficulty of the work and the skills required.

In the music world, entertainers provide an interesting contrast to athletes when it comes to take home pay. Female musicians like Barbara Streisand and Joan Sutherland are constantly setting attendance records—so is Billie Jean. Female musicians are not paid on the basis of their physical power although physical power is required to perform. Beverly Sills salary is not dependent upon whether her vocal range is wider or louder than Robert Merrill’s. Her earnings do not depend on whether she can hold a note longer than he can. She gets paid well because she is popular and draws crowds. This is why female athletes make sense when they say that unequal pay is fair only when they do not draw crowds. Unequal pay is unfair when it is based exclusively on sex. The sports world could learn a great deal from the standards used by professional artists and musicians. Popularity is rewarded and excellence and success is a function of the
abilities within each type. Perfection is an elusive concept but one can say perfection often emerges from the talents and skills developed by individuals given the limits (or strengths) of their own physical type. Perfection and excellence should be rewarded regardless of one’s sex.

Due to the pressure exerted by Billie Jean King and some other members of the athletic world and the women’s movement, changes are coming for professional female athletes. One of the keys to their success has been their ability to demonstrate the drawing power they possess at events. The public is slowly becoming as interested in a woman’s event as a man’s event. The increase in interest will be partly a function of more television coverage and publicity. If the networks insist on limiting the amount of air time women get such as a meager ten hours for one year, then it is conceivable that a suit should be filed against the networks.

On May 1, 1972 the National Organization for Women filed a massive brief with the Federal Communication Commission, challenging the renewal of the broadcasting license of WABC-TV (Channel 7) in New York. The charge was blatant sexism in advertisements, employment, news coverage, and programming. The group filing the brief tried to show how commercials, daytime programming, talk shows and dramatic shows reinforced sexual stereotypes. Air time essentially belongs to the people. That is why broadcasting networks are licensed by the federal government through the F.C.C. The Fairness doctrine is frequently employed by those wishing to challenge license renewals of broadcasters. This doctrine which emerged out of a public interest standard demands a more balanced representative of differing views and opinions. If a network is going to present an issue it is supposed to present contrasting views. Similarly, if a network is going to televise sports it has an obligation to show women’s events as well as men’s. Televising sports is not like presenting controversial issues of public importance but the impact of giving female athletes unequal air time seems to violate the spirit of the Fairness doctrine as much as a network’s failure to give equal time for discussion of public issues. It is true that there are far less professional women’s teams than they are men’s but it would seem equitable that when a network is televising sports which have both male and female professionals such as tennis and golf, that women get equal time with men.

The effect of unequal air time is that it prevents the public from watching women play. It suggests a disinterest by the networks in the activities of female pros. Also, it can mean less money for women since they would not gain the popularity that male athletes get by being shown through the TV media. Finally, female pros earn less money if any royalties or dividends are given to athletes when programs are repeatedly used. The battle for “acceptance” of women in sports will take that much longer without television coverage. Many people feel that if something is unacceptable, television networks will not transmit it. Thus, if women are not seen competing, female competition must still be a social taboo.

Hopefully, the discriminatory practices in women’s athletics will change
before too long. Either female athletes will unionize or continually file suits until their demands are met. Now that women athletes are aware of the inequities and realize they have more bargaining power they should be demanding more in their contracts or refusing to play.

Unfortunately, the traditional view that women and athletic competition do not go together, still lingers on, even if the pay issue is slowly being settled. The humor or distaste which certain people have towards seeing women compete shows up in the printed media. Frequently, a pro is portrayed more as a sex object than an athletic talent. The women's amateur golf championship was described as: “a congregation of very amiable competitive dames who like to gather annually to socialize and destroy each other’s golfing reputations.” Frequently women are not viewed as serious competitors. A typical women’s event is described as “a lark” or a “happy day on the fairway.” Journalists compound the effect with such expressions as, the “beauty putter turned beastly,” (a golfer) a “freckled-lovely,” (a long-distance runner), “Baugh brings false eyelashes and dimples to a sport that could use a little make-up.” Barry McDermott of Sports Illustrated recently covered the U.S. Women’s Golf Match. He said: “A women’s open is a fractured love affair, equal parts of heartbreak and humiliation that help set back the player’s psyches eleven months or so.” Also he described an event by saying “...stand back in your blazer and smirk while the whimpering girls flounder around like paper boats in the Atlantic. After all, if they can’t stand the heat they ought to be back in the kitchen.” This comment echoes the statement made by District Judge Bonsal in the well-known draft case U.S. v. St. Clair, 291 F.Supp. 122 (S.D.N.Y. 1968). He said:

In providing for involuntary service for men and voluntary service for women, Congress followed the teachings of history that if a nation is to survive, men must provide the first line of defense while women keep the home fires burning. 291 F. Supp. at 125.

Dotty Fothergill, a new face on the scene in competitive bowling was described in the following way by Herman Weiskopf of Sports Illustrated,

Dotty can be totally feminine, a blue-eyed, brown haired, 25 year old in high heels and mod dresses. But heels don’t work very well where she now spends most of her time.

The article from which that quote above was taken was entitled, “Super-fingers vs. the Chauvinists.”

Sportswriters spend a great deal of time describing the looks of an athlete rather than the quality of her game. Jockey Robyn Smith, is described as the “beauty among the Beasts.” Those females who won several medals at the Olympics in Soporro, Japan were described as the “Go-Go Girls of Soporro.” Last year an article appeared in Sports Illustrated about the University of Oregon’s female coxswain on their crew team. The article
focused on the unfavorable reaction of the Western Intercollegiate Crew Coaches Association to her being on the team and the problems it posed for Oregon if they wanted to compete in the Big Eight. Strangely enough, the title of the article was, “The Case of the Ineligible Bachelorette.”

In contrast to the effort made by journalists to describe female athletes as cute little buttons engaged in sandbox competition, there is the other extreme in journalism perhaps more injurious and detrimental to the psyche of the female professional. Snide and cruel remarks crop up when the subject is lady wrestling, roller derby, etc. Prize fighting between ladies has long been frowned upon and frequently outlawed in many states. Recently, in Pennsylvania the restriction against such exhibitions was lifted. Philadelphia promoters started looking for female talent. They concentrated on the girls in the roller derby. As yet, no skater has received the offer with approval.

There are the uncalled-for comments directed at the so-called “unfeminine” athletes—the tomboys—such as Billie Jean King, or Babe Zaharias. Babe wore her hair short as a matter of convenience but this was construed as part of her “male image.” Athletic promoters would joke about whether to assign her to the men’s or women’s locker room.

Softball, football, roller derby, wrestling, boxing, basketball, etc. are considered unfeminine sports for women. No matter how great or daring the female athlete is, often she is viewed as a freak or portrayed as the stereotype of a grizzly physical education teacher who “made it” professionally. Marie Hart, a women’s physical educator told a columnist for Ramparts: “our society cuts the penis off the male who decided to be a dancer and puts it on the female who participates in competitive athletics.” The animal-like quality of Dick Butkus is admired throughout the sports world. A woman with a similar dose of aggression, ambition, and a desire to win in her veins is deemed offensive to femininity and sports in general.

The male sports establishment does to a female what the military does to a WAC. In addition to the burdens of serving in the military, a WAC must contend with the negative image she knows her male counterparts have for her. A WAC’s image is caught between the evils of two worlds—neither of which is of her choosing. She is either a fast or loose woman or she is a dike. In the sports world a female pro is cute and dumb or she is the Amazonian jerk whose aggressiveness defies femininity and has no place in the sports world because a woman is not supposed to act that way although a man can. Obviously, a double standard exists. What are considered great qualities in male athletes are discouraged in women. Athletic prowess in a woman often makes her an object of ridicule whereas for men it becomes a source of great social status. The double bind the female pro is caught in was well defined when the President of Radcliffe said:

In testing and other achievement-oriented situations she worries not only about failure but also about success. If she fails, she is not living up to her own standards of performance; if she succeeds
she is not living up to societal expectations about the female role.

The life of a female professional athlete in many ways seems undesirable. Attitudinal pressures and societal demands coupled with the rigors of competitive sport make a female pro’s life draining, if not oppressive. On the outside there may appear a gleam of happiness as a photographer catches a pro in action during her moment of glory. Magazine articles assume by inference that being “number one” is glamorous and highly desirable. It does mark a tremendous achievement in an athlete’s life, but for a female athlete, “getting there” is almost a nightmare. No female professional is without some battle scars.

Our society acclaims those who are “the best” in their field yet we still continue to treat female athletes a bit differently. She is, in a sense, a marginal person, never fully accepted by men or women. Hopefully, our society will come to the point when women will not only be given equal opportunity to participate in sport but will not be made to feel they are unfeminine, inferior or abnormal. Someday, perhaps, the chauvinist remarks about female athletes of one Sanche de Gramont will be a laughingstock. Women who indulge in sports will not be compared to longshoremen by the male establishment. All comparisons will be gone.
2. Ibid., at 123.
3. Ibid., at 125.
4. Ibid., at 125.
8. Ibid., at 92.
9. Ibid., at 92.
10. Ibid., at 92.
15. *Supra* note 4 at p. 92.
16. Ibid., at 92.
17. Ibid., at 96.
20. Ibid., at 18.