

She won a gold medal because she's pretty

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An examination of past Olympic Games television coverage shows notable differences in the way sports commentators talk about athletes, depending upon the athletes' races, gender and nationalities.

Two studies by University of Delaware Professor James Angelini published this month in academic journals show particular [biases](#). The first details differences in coverage of male and [female athletes](#).

"It's all about luck with the females. It's all about ability with the males," said Angelini, assistant professor of communication.

See Angelini talk about his findings in this video:

The second study shows NBC disproportionately covers American [athletes](#). While it's no surprise that NBC, the network with exclusive rights to the games in the U.S., heavily focuses on Americans, Angelini's findings show it goes far beyond [national pride](#). NBC highlights Americans at three to four times the rate their successes would suggest.

"You see all this coverage of American athletes even when they fail and there's so little coverage of the gold, silver and bronze medal winners (in certain sports)," he said.

Angelini and his research partners record NBC's primetime coverage of each day's games on its flagship channel and code the footage based on 17 categories. The categories include athletic ability, strength, commitment to the sport, intelligence and luck. For the 2008 Summer

Games in Beijing, they did the same with China's CCTV coverage. This year, they'll also be screening the BBC during the London Games (July 27-Aug. 12).

"The British broadcasts will probably be a bit more balanced than the American broadcasts on NBC," Angelini said. "It won't be fully equitable, but I think it may be better."

The gender-based study published in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* found:

- When female athletes succeed, commentators tend to focus on luck and less on physical ability.
- When female athletes fail, physical ability and commitment are noted.
- When male athletes succeed, commentators applaud their skill and commitment to the sport.
- When male athletes fail, it is not necessarily about their failure, but about how their competitors succeeded.
- In 2010, 75 percent of the most-mentioned athletes were male.

The nationality study published in the *International Journal of Sport Communication* found:

- When American athletes succeed, commentators were more likely to focus on their intellect, commitment, and luck (both good and bad).
- When non-American athletes failed, commentators were more likely to say they failed because they lacked the strength and skill of other athletes.
- American athletes received enhanced comments about their

outgoing/extroverted nature.

- Non-American athletes received more comments about the size and parts of their bodies.
- Overall, commentary about American athletes often focused more on the intangible aspects of their performances, rather than strength and skill.

Angelini's findings also included marked differences in commentators' treatment of race:

- When discussing African-American athletes commentators focused more on [physical ability](#) and strength.
- Asian athletes garnered a disproportionate number of comments about intelligence.
- When discussing white athletes, commentators were more likely to mention commitment and composure.

The danger in these skewed representations, according to Angelini, could be in their effects on viewers' perceptions. People build their belief systems about gender, races and ethnicities, based in part, by what they see on television. Sports tend to draw large audiences, particularly amongst young men. And, the Olympics are by far the largest sporting event worldwide. He worries about how the messaging will interplay with the audience's view of the world.

Provided by University of Delaware

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