

Media celebrate female NFL referee, but fumble deeper issues

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The sports media's positive reaction to the hiring of a female referee in professional football is a good sign, according to a Penn State researcher, but did little to help expose deeper issues that hinder greater acceptance of women in sports.

In a study of online stories and posts about the hiring of Shannon Eastin as an NFL official during the 2012 referee's union strike, Dunja Antunovic, a doctoral candidate in mass communications, said that the media mostly celebrated her NFL debut.

"It was generally positive," said Antunovic. "However, it might be a mistake to assume with just one woman in the field, that this will mean positive things for other [women](#) who might be hired."

The stories about Eastin officiating a preseason game between the San Diego Chargers and Green Bay Packers and a regular season game between the St. Louis Rams and Detroit Lions, which appeared in [search engine results](#), were positive, but were not reported thoroughly and often avoided an attempt at more comprehensive analysis of gender issues in sports.

"Very few of the stories positioned Eastin's inclusion in the NFL in the larger context of the status of women in sports that are traditionally dominated by men," said Antunovic. "To their credit, the reporters talked about Eastin, even praised the move, but that was about it."

Stories about Eastin in blogs and websites that cover women in sports rarely showed up in Google search results and were not referenced by journalists in the mainstream media. Antunovic had to select those sites specifically to analyze how they covered Eastin's hiring.

"Most of the really deep coverage about Eastin and women in sports came from sites, such as Blogger.com and Women Talk Sports," said Antunovic. "However, those blogs were basically buried in the results, if they showed up at all."

This superficial coverage of women in sports may ignore structural issues that can keep women from fully participating in roles in sports that were traditionally male, such as officiating and coaching, she added.

The news of Eastin's NFL officiating debut did not receive such a positive welcome on message boards and forums on sports sites, but these users typically are trying to cause controversy, said Antunovic, who reported her findings in the current issue of the *Journal of Sports Media*. Sexist statements, not surprisingly, were common in these venues.

While the study did not try to compare the reaction of sports journalists in the Eastin case with coverage of earlier firsts for women, such as female reporters being allowed in male locker rooms, most prior studies suggested that reporters were more enthusiastic this event.

"Although I didn't formally compare the media coverage of other cases of women entering male [sports](#), based on other studies and readings, the [mainstream media](#) reaction to Eastin seemed much more positive," said Antunovic.

Antunovic used Google because it is the top search provider in the United States. She selected stories from time periods immediately before and after the preseason and regular season games that Eastin officiated.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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