

# How do sports news shows disguise sexism against women's sports?

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Sports news shows cover women's sports in a dull, lackluster manner, making women's sports seem less exciting and entertaining than men's, according to the latest research in a study spanning 25 years. Based on its latest iteration in 2014, the study finds that sexist coverage of women's sports is often subtle, and therefore difficult to challenge. The study is out today in *Gender & Society*.

The 25-year study was conducted by Cheryl Cook at Purdue University and Michela Musto and Michael A. Messner at the University of Southern California. Every five years beginning in 1989, they examined six weeks of sports news on three Los Angeles-based network affiliate stations and three weeks of ESPN's SportsCenter. According to their research, [coverage](#) of women athletes by mostly male commentators shows how sexism in sports news has changed. Women's sports coverage tended to be overtly sexist from 1989-1999, trivializing by linking women to their conventional roles as mothers, wives, and girlfriends from 1999-2009, and now, based on the most recent data from 2014, coverage depicts women's sports in a lackluster manner, which they call "gender bland sexism."

"Sports news shows now disguise sexism in their 'matter-of-fact' reactions to women athletes' performance, subtly sending viewers the message that women's sports lack the excitement and interest of men's sports," wrote the researchers.

In 2014, the researchers found that compared to coverage of men's

sports, coverage of women's sports had less:

- **Air time:** SportsCenter's segments on men's sports averaged two minutes and five seconds in length, with stories about men's sports on the local stations averaging 47 seconds. Women's stories averaged one minute and 17 seconds on SportsCenter—nearly 50% shorter than men's sports stories—and 44 seconds on the local affiliates.
- **Fast-paced, entertaining language:** Sports commentators made jokes and used action-packaged language and rapid speech more often when they were discussing men's sports than when they were discussing women's sports.
- **Interviews:** Players, coaches, and other sports figures were interviewed in one out of every three men's sports stories on SportsCenter and the local affiliate stations but for women's sports stories, in only one out of every four stories on the local stations and none of the SportsCenter stories.
- **Game footage:** Game footage highlighting impressive plays accompanied most of men's sports segments—83.1% of local news and 88.6% of SportsCenter stories. Instead of featuring in-action game footage, women were frequently shown on the bench cheering for their teammates or hugging one another while celebrating a victory.
- **Lavish compliments:** Sports commentators rarely gave women lavish compliments, though they regularly called men's athletic accomplishments "perfect," "beautiful," or "amazing."

"The stubborn persistence of the lower quantitative coverage and the poor production values serve as key to marginalizing women within the male-dominated, male-controlled institution of sport," continued the study authors. "Ultimately, the continued belief that women's [sports](#) are less interesting may limit television ratings, ticket sales, the amount advertisers are willing to pay for broadcast time during women's events,

the potential for corporate endorsements for [women](#) athletes, and the salaries of players and coaches."

**More information:** "'FROM FIZZLE TO SIZZLE!": Televised Sports News and the Production of Gender-Bland Sexism," by Musto et al, in *Gender & Society*.

Provided by SAGE Publications

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