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Differential Media Coverage of Men's and Women's Intercollegiate Basketball: Reflection of Gender Ideology

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the extent to which mass media coverage of men's and women's sport reflect the broader gender ideology of society. Using television coverage of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball as our context and verbal commentary as our text, an attempt was made (1) to identify qualitative differences in the manner in which the men's and women's games were presented by the networks, and, if coverage differences did exist, (2) to identify ideological assumptions which may underlie such differences. Data were derived from a content analysis of 16 televised college basketball games from the 1988-90 seasons. Analyses led to the identification of the following general coverage differences: (a) the men's game and performances were used as a standard of comparison and understanding for the women's game and performances; (b) the women's game was qualified as "women's basketball"; (c) non-parallel and sexist language was used to depict female athletes and their performance; and (d) expectations relative to physicality and athleticism. These findings suggest that the ideology of sport as a male domain is reinforced through differential media coverage of and commentary on men's and women's college basketball.
INTRODUCTION

Although the mass media has long been recognized for the substantial role it plays in shaping opinion, reinforcing the status quo, or framing attitudes (Larson 1964; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1949), its impact on shaping meanings and interpretations has only recently been analyzed within the context of sport. This relationship is particularly important to explore given the fact that the media provides the audience with more than a sporting event -- it represents the event in terms of a unique framework or perspective, presenting the audience not only with a sporting event but also an accompanying set of instructions or maxims on how to interpret the event (Hargreaves 1986).

While a growing number of studies analyzing ideological meanings contained in magazine and newspaper text and photographs exist in the literature (Bryant 1980; Duncan 1990; Hilliard 1984; Rintala and Birrell 1984), considerably fewer analyses exist interpreting meanings of televised sporting events (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988). Unlike live attendance, which affords thousands of spectators opportunities to view and interpret sporting events directly for themselves, televised sport, through its technology, provides millions of viewers with selected content and information framed by verbal commentary, language and vocabulary, and visual as well as auditory imagery. Television's flow of communication and re-presentation of events directs audience attention to how information or messages should be read, heard, and seen as well as the meanings given to what is read, heard, and seen (J. Hargreaves 1986; J. A. Hargreaves 1986).

Essentially, television plays a significant role through its reproduction of images and messages that legitimate the dominant ideology of a society. As a result, the basic attitudes and meanings that evolve from such mediated images and messages are so widely accepted that they are rarely challenged, questioned, or even analyzed. This phenomenon is particularly noted with respect to images of gender and media portrayals of men's and women's sport (Birrell and Cole 1990; J. Hargreaves 1986; J. A. Hargreaves 1986). For example, research suggests that gender role images of both men and women are not only supportive of traditional, conventional, and essentially stereotypic portrayals, but that such images have remained relatively stable and unchanged over the past 15 years (Signorielli 1989).

Qualitative and quantitative differences have also been found in the media depictions of males and females in sport. For example, female athletes tend to be either absent or underrepresented in such magazines as Runners World, Sport, Sports Illustrated, Tennis
(Bryant 1980; Kane 1988), *Young Athlete* (Rintala and Birrell 1984), and *Sports Illustrated for Kids* (Duncan and Sayaovong 1989) and do not receive the same amount of television coverage as males (Boutilier and SanGiovanni 1983; Duncan and Hasbrook 1988). In both print and visual media, females are more likely to be depicted in individual rather than team sports, and, despite significantly less air time, fewer representations of team or individual "masculine" sports (such as shot putting) are offered photographically or through visual images (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Kane 1988 1989). In addition, women are more likely to be posed in inactive rather than active postures and positions (Duncan and Sayaovong 1989; Rintala and Birrell 1984). Studies examining media treatment of women in sport have found that the visual production techniques, language, terminology, and commentary used in coverage of women's sport are selectively imposed by the media to provide a very stereotypic view -- one which tends to sexualize, commodify, trivialize, and devalue women's sporting accomplishments (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Hilliard 1984; Kane 1989; Kinkema 1989; MacNeill 1988; Rintala and Birrell 1984).

Messages of trivialization, marginalization, and denial of power are recurrent themes in textual analyses of scripts from both magazines (Hilliard 1984) and television (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988), indicating that the mediated productions of women's sport tend to ignore women's athletic ability and success. Instead, focus is on character flaws, emotional dependency, anxieties, sexual identity, and role conflicts (Hilliard 1984).

Media personnel have increasingly been made aware of such coverage differences (Halpert 1988), and consequently, networks have undertaken sensitization efforts to ensure a more equitable presentation of men's and women's sport (e.g., hiring specialists to monitor manner in which women athletes are presented in Olympics). Thus, as we progress into the decade of the 1990s, it may be anticipated that some of the previously identified differences will disappear since telecasts are more closely monitored. On the other hand, since sport itself has been viewed as a site for the naturalization of gender differences (Willis 1982) and given both the strength of the dominant gender ideology and the male dominated composition of the media, minimal change in media coverage from that reported in earlier studies would be expected.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine media coverage for men's and women's televised sport and to determine what changes, if any, have taken place in recent years. Findings from this study, when examined in conjunction with previous research on gender differences in media coverage (e.g.,
Duncan and Hasbrook 1988), will be capable of either validating existing themes in the literature or providing evidence that social change has indeed transpired.

Using television coverage of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball as the context, an attempt was made to identify presentation differences in television coverage with primary attention given to the verbal commentary used to describe the contest or athletes. The primary goal was to (1) identify qualitative differences in television coverage of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball, and if coverage differences did exist, (2) identify ideological assumptions which may underlie such differences.

METHOD

A sample of 16 telecasts (6 men's games and 10 women's games) played during the 1988-89 and 1989-90 seasons was examined in order to identify possible differences in media coverage of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball. The nine telecasts from the 1988-89 season (5 from CBS and 4 from ESPN) were drawn exclusively from post-season competition in the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments. Although post-season competition provided the only opportunity to obtain a reasonable number of televised women's games, the possibility existed that coverage of post-season competition would differ from that during the regular season. Thus, seven televised games from the 1989-90 season (2 from CBS and 5 from ESPN) were randomly drawn from both regular season and post-season telecasts. Two television networks were needed given the limited television coverage granted women's basketball. Moreover, since television coverage of women's basketball represented a deviation from standard basketball programming, a decision was made to include more women's game in the final sample.

Telecasts of the 16 games were video recorded in their entirety. Two of the authors independently viewed and content analyzed the tapes of each game, identifying specific differences in the commentary between the men's and women's telecasts ¹ A major criterion in determining the existence of coverage differences was whether or not parallel and symmetrical commentary was used to describe both male and female athletes and their actions on the court. Theoretically, since commentators were describing athletes engaged in a common activity (i.e., basketball), commentary in the men's and women's games would be equivalent or comparable in terms of language (e.g., use same vocabulary to describe similar
actions), kind (e.g., focus on similar aspects of games or athletes), and reference (e.g., use parallel reference points when making comparisons). One delimitation should be noted: because some rule differences exist between men's and women's basketball at the college level, we expected some minor differences in coverage related to such rule differences. For example, since the women's game uses a 30-second shot clock and the men's game a 45-second shot clock, commentators might focus on the more deliberate nature of the offensive patterns used in the men's game due to the longer shot clock. The intent of this study, however, was to identify differences in commentary coverage generally unrelated to such rule differences.

As a result of this analysis, the two investigators independently created separate coverage summaries for each of the 16 games analyzed. These coverage summaries contained a running account of the type of verbal commentary used throughout each game. The authors then met to compare and discuss the coverage summaries for each game. In the event that inconsistencies or differences were found in the accounts of the two investigators, the original game tape was reviewed by the senior investigator to correct any possible misrepresentation of the verbal commentary. These discussions led to the identification of general types of coverage differences between the men's and women's games. After developing a master list of general coverage differences, specific examples representative of the general categories were identified.

Although certainly not meant to be mutually exclusive or exhaustive in nature, four coverage difference themes were developed and will be discussed in this paper: (1) the men's game and male performance were used as a standard of comparison and understanding for the women's game and female performance; (2) qualification of women's game as "women's" basketball; (3) non-parallel and sexist language was used to depict female athletes and their performance; and (4) different expectations existed relative to physicality and athleticism. In general, such an approach was designed to "let the data speak" rather than impose a preconceived conceptual or theoretical framework on the basketball coverage.

After identifying general categories of coverage differences, the authors attempted to identify the assumptions or ideology underlying these differences. As indicated previously, a particular focus was placed on the extent to which basketball coverage reflected the broader gender ideology of the society.
FINDINGS

Use of Male Standards for Comparison

One of the most noticeable coverage differences related to the standards of comparison used when describing performances of athletes, team strategies, or styles of play. In an attempt to provide a reference point for these various descriptions, both male and female athletes were compared to a socially constructed standard, and that standard was male (either male athletes, male teams, or male performances). Usage of male standards of comparison establishes a condition of "otherness" for women (Duncan 1990; Kuhn 1985) as masculinity becomes the standard against which everything is measured.

Although in a few instances the actions of women athletes and teams were compared to those of other women athletes/teams, the skills of male athletes or the performances of men's teams were never compared to those of female athletes or women's teams. In fact, the only reference to the existence of women's basketball during the telecast of men's games came in the form of network promotions for an upcoming championship game. Although the practice of comparing the performances of male athletes to other male athletes provided a valid (and parallel) reference point for understanding action during the men's game, comparing the skills of women athletes to the likes of Magic Johnson, Bob Cousey, Charles Barkley, Larry Bird, and Michael Jordan during women's games represented a non-parallel standard of comparison.

A related coverage difference was noted in the practice of using the rule structure of the men's game as a reference point for understanding the women's game. Commentary during the telecasts of women's games frequently discussed differences between the rules of women's and men's basketball. For example, prior to beginning a women's championship game, the network provided the viewers with a list of the various ways in which the rules of the women's game differed from the men's game (e.g., no 10-second backcourt limit, 30-second vs. 45-second shot clock). At no time during the men's game were similar rule comparisons made with the women's game. It should be mentioned, however, that on more than one occasion, commentators attempted to incorrectly apply the men's rules to the women's game. For example, on several occasions, when a women's team took longer than 10 seconds to bring the ball past midcourt (only a rule violation in the men's game), announcers expressed surprise that the officials "missed the call" or suggested that the team "got a break." In contrast, instances of mistakenly applying the women's rules to the men's game were not observed during any of the telecasts of men's games.
Characteristics of the men's game were frequently incorporated into comments made during the telecasts of women's games. After making an observation about the women's game, commentators frequently followed up on that observation with a parallel comment related to the men's game. Examples included statements that: (a) the women needed a third official like the men have; (b) applauded the idea of a lob pass to the big player under the basket because this is what has made the men's game exciting; and (c) there has been increasing concern about the number of fouls at the end of the game and that the "men are saying the same thing." Non-parallel coverage resulted when no examples were found of commentators comparing aspects of the men's game with the women's game during telecasts of men's basketball.

An interesting example of the inclination to use the men's game as the standard as well as a vehicle for legitimating the women's game was evident by the way the commentators "set the stage" for a particular women's game for viewers. Commentators noted that in addition to both women's teams being ranked among the top twenty, the men's teams at both universities were also ranked in the top twenty. A discussion about the recent encounter between these two men's teams ensued and the commentators then speculated as to whether the women's team at the victorious university would be able to match the accomplishments of the men's team. Analyses of the commentaries from the men's games showed no parallel reference to the existence of women's teams at the competing universities. Again, such practices establish a condition of "otherness" for women and the women's game as the men's game becomes a mechanism for granting legitimacy to women's basketball (Duncan 1990).

Not only were comparisons made with men's intercollegiate basketball, but in some situations the men's professional league (National Basketball Association) was used as a reference point for describing the women's game. Although possessing little relevance to actions on the court, commentators would nevertheless explain to viewers how a particular play sequence or action would be called in the NBA. For example, in one situation the commentator indicated that the play would have been ruled a "force out" in the NBA; on another occasion the announcer indicated the basket would have counted in the NBA since it was "a case of continuation after the shot." Once, after a woman athlete shot an "air ball" from the 30-foot range, the commentator suggested that the shot was "NBA 3-point stuff" and questioned the judgment of the athlete in taking a shot from such a distance.

Additional support for the notion that the male standard served as a reference point and possibly as a form of legitimation for the
women's game was also noted during the 1989 women's NCAA championship game. Both the men's and women's NCAA Final Four tournaments were held in the state of Washington, and during the telecast of the women's game, the commentators mentioned on at least five occasions that the site of the women's tournament (Tacoma) was only 28 miles down the road from the site of the men's tournament (Seattle). Interestingly, telecasts of the men's games from Seattle made no reference to the close proximity of Tacoma to Seattle.

In general, the usage of male athletes/teams for comparison purposes during telecasts of women's games could be categorized as attempts to: (1) grant legitimacy to women's game; and (2) facilitate understanding of the women's game.

Qualification of Women's Game

Analyses of telecast commentary from men's and women's basketball games suggested the existence of two categories of basketball -- basketball and women's basketball. While the term "basketball" was used without qualification in reference to the men's game, any reference to the game played by the women was almost always qualified as "women's" basketball. The following examples (first from a men's telecast and second from a women's telecast) reflect this distinction or verbal contrast: (a) NCAA Championship vs. NCAA Women's Championship; (b) Final Four vs. Women's Final Four; (c) "he is one of the top coaches in the game today" vs. "she is one of the finest young coaches in women's basketball"; (d) "college basketball player of the year" vs. "college basketball's woman player of the year"; and (e) "one of the top players in the game today" vs. "one of the most dominating players in women's basketball today." Such qualification suggests that women's basketball represents a hybrid form (or off-shoot) of normative or universal basketball -- men's basketball.

Non-Parallel and Sexist Language

A third major difference related to the nature of the language, terminology, and cliches used during the telecasts of men's and women's games. It was apparent that the vocabulary used in the women's game was borrowed from that of the men's game. Although an inevitable problem, in some situations -- most notably in descriptions of team strategies or of players -- terminology was inappropriately applied to the women's game. For example, in nearly all situations, player-to-player defenses were termed "man-to-man" defenses. Women athletes were called "defensemen," and well-coordinated teams possessed a "workmanlike" orientation.
Vocabulary commonly used in men's basketball was also applied to the women's game, particularly with reference to action and competition. Frequently these terms were verbs characterizing acts of aggression. For example, players were "hammered" on the rebound, "stuffed" on the lay-up, and "clobbered" by the opponent. Bodies were described as "banging" and "jousting"; teams were "buried", and shots were "nailed". Although usage of such terms in and of itself may not be unusual, such terms were not necessarily used to describe similar actions displayed by male athletes. Terms such as "clobbered" and "hammered" usually described action of a much less physical nature if used to describe the actions of female (as opposed to male) athletes. This uneven application of terms to describe non-parallel behaviors in the men's and women's games suggests that such terms might not be appropriate descriptors of action on the court.

In addition, inconsistencies were noted in the language describing male and female athletes, as men and women were described in non-parallel terms. Although women basketball players were frequently called "ladies," men were rarely referred to by the parallel term of "gentlemen." When the term "gentleman" was applied, it was not in reference to action on the basketball court. While the term "Lady" is incorporated into a large number of women's team names (e.g., Lady Tigers, Lady Vols), commentators frequently used the term "lady" when referring to specific female athletes. Examples include comments such as: (a) "good defense by the lady in blue"; (b) "lady who has to switch to point guard"; (c) "young lady on the baseline"; and (d) "young lady going for the basketball." Non-parallel terms were sometimes incorporated into a single comment, such as "the 30-second clock is used for the ladies while the men use a 45-second clock."

Another inconsistent and non-parallel use of language was reflected in the usage of the term "girls" when referring to female athletes while not using the term "boys" to describe male athletes. Examples include such descriptions as: (a) "contact with the big girl"; (b) "she's the girl they want to look for"; (c) "they will wear out the big girls if they run too much"; (d) "she is the littlest girl on the floor"; and (e) "she is their go-to-girl."

In sum, differences in the language used to depict male and female athletes could be characterized by either (a) an absence of an appropriate vocabulary to describe the women's game of basketball (e.g., player-to-player defense), or (b) non-parallel terms in describing male and female athletes (e.g., men vs. girls [instead of women], men vs. ladies [instead of women]).
Different Expectations of Athleticism and Physicality

A fourth set of differences related to the emphases and expectations associated with the athleticism and physicality of male and female athletes. In general, greater emphasis seemed to be placed on the athleticism of male athletes while non-sport activities of women athletes received more attention. More specifically, viewers were more likely to hear about the school activities and non-athletic honors of female athletes in comparison to what was said about male athletes. Female athletes were described or characterized by accomplishments such as homecoming queen in high school, student government participant, class valedictorian, Dean's list honoree, most popular student award recipient, and officer in ROTC. In contrast, male athletes were more likely to be described or characterized by their high school and college sport-related experiences -- success of high school sport team, participation in multiple sports, career scoring average, and years as a starter. It was not unusual for commentators of men's games to relate humorous anecdotes about athletes' past athletic experiences and relationships with coaches, or to describe them in terms of their physical attributes (e.g., strength, power, speed, quickness).

Commentator surprise at the athleticism of women athletes represented a second difference in expectations related to physicality. Although assumed to be a natural trait of male athletes, commentators specifically drew attention to athleticism among female athletes. For example, one commentator noted that a particular women's team "has seniors who are athletes." In another situation, a matchup between two women was specifically cited because "both are athletic."

In a similar fashion, announcers seemed to have different sets of expectations for the performance of male and female athletes. For example, a "routine skill" in men's basketball such as a left-handed lay-up to avoid the defender led the announcer to marvel when a female athlete successfully employed the same skill (e.g., "Oh my!"). Similar performances by male athletes are generally taken for granted, rarely elicit surprise or excitement, and are simply acknowledged by commentators.

Different expectations were also noted in terms of acceptable levels of physical contact. Although commentators often make reference to the physical contact which transpires during the course of a basketball game, commentators were much quicker to notice minor incidents of physical contact in the women's game compared to the men's game. In fact it seemed that male commentators were sometimes surprised at the physical nature of the women's game. For example, after a male commentator observed a woman player "throwing an elbow", he indicated that the official "astutely picked it
up." In contrast, observation of men's games suggested that "elbow throwing" was an acceptable practice, and only in extreme situations did commentators make reference to this action. An interesting example of different expectations regarding physical contact was evident when a woman athlete was called for a pushing foul. While the female announcer called the foul "questionable," the male announcer described the same action as "bulldozing."

When physical contact was evident between women athletes, commentators often used extreme analogies to describe the athletes' exploits. For example, in a situation where two players were somewhat physical, the commentator observed that the women were "like two prize fighters in the ring who were trying to beat each other up." On another occasion the commentator laughed at an instance of physical contact under the basket in which one woman pushed with her hips and indicated it was "like that found in the wrestling federation." After viewing the replay of this same action, the commentator again laughed at the physical contact between players. Similar reactions or analogies during telecasts of a men's game were only noted in extreme situations in which the action was on the verge of an actual fight.

Moreover, comments made during the telecast of women's games also suggested differential expectations in terms of game strategy. Commentators were less likely to discuss the strategy dimensions of women's games compared to men's games. More specifically, in a situation in which a team was losing by 14 points with 2 1/2 minutes left in the game the commentator indicated that the woman coach was giving her team their last second "words of encouragement" during the time-out huddle. In contrast, commentary during similar situations in men's games focused almost solely on strategy. Some comments suggested that the thinking dimensions of the game might be difficult for some women athletes. For example, following a 5-second call made on a player, the commentator stated, "Not only do you have to pass the ball but you have to think about what you are going to do, and the player can be distracted by that." As suggested by Duncan and Hasbrook (1988), differing emphases on the strategy component of the men's and women's game by the media in essence constitutes a denial of the women's game and a confirmation of the men's game.

In general, the different expectations in terms of athleticism and physicality were evident by: (a) greater focus on non-athletic dimensions of women athletes' lives, (b) surprise at the athleticism of women athletes, (c) greater preoccupation with "minor" forms of contact in women's game, and (d) less focus on strategy and thinking dimensions of the women's game.
DISCUSSION

Because we found several thematic differences in the commentary coverage of men's and women's basketball telecasts -- use of male standards for comparison, qualification of women's basketball, non-parallel and sexist language, and different expectations of athleticism and physicality -- we attempted to identify the underlying basis for such differences. By means of introducing our conclusion as to source, we should make it clear that our data did not reveal more blatant forms of sexist practices identified in previous studies: depiction of women as sex objects through commodification or objectification; preoccupation with women's bodies which marginalizes or trivializes their sport performance; or use of overtly sexist language (Duncan 1990; Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Featherstone 1983; Ferguson, et al. 1990; MacNeill 1988; Messner 1990). Rather, our data suggest that commentary differences are often so subtle in form and content that they often go unnoticed and are rarely challenged or questioned. We suggest that the underpinnings of these subtle differences in coverage lie in the underlying ideology that historically links sport with masculinity and males.

We suggest that inappropriateness of terms describing game situations (i.e., man-to-man defense), absence of a vocabulary to describe women's basketball (i.e., player-to-player defense), terms which reduce the status of women (i.e., girls), or which suggest notions of stereotypic gender role behavior (i.e., ladies) and use of non-parallel language (i.e., men vs. girls and ladies) are the result of socially constructed meanings based on culturally ideological notions related to definitions of sport, masculinity, and femininity. In short, the institution of sport is a system of social practices based on two symbolic assumptions: (a) the body is an instrument of power (J. Hargreaves 1987) -- or stated somewhat differently, power resides in the physical body -- and (b) the social construction of the human body is gendered (Desaulniers 1988). Given these assumptions, sport by definition represents a means through which men's separation from and power over women is embodied and naturalized (Messner 1988). This ideology is reinforced by comparisons of men running faster and throwing farther -- images which convey the "natural" superiority of males over females (Messner 1988). Such ideological beliefs are reinforced by the way network commentators describe the women's game using male standards, non-parallel terms, and qualifications that in effect not only separate it from the men's game but devalue it as well.

Further assumptions stemming from this ideology may also explain the differential expectations evidenced by sport commentary.
during women's games -- assumptions that: (a) women's bodies are not as well suited for the strength, endurance, and skill demands of basketball; (b) women basketball players are females first (and their behavior should be consistent with traditional gender role expectations which are social constructions); (c) because women's bodies are not the same and they do not move or perform identical skills as the males, the women's game is a much simpler version of basketball requiring less challenge, skill, and physicality; and perhaps (d) given the social construction of both sport and gender, athletics represent a small dimension of a female athlete's life.

Support for these assumptions can be found in recent discussions pertaining to social and symbolic meanings of the body, sport, and gender (Desaulniers 1988; J. Hargreaves 1987; J. A. Hargreaves 1986). Power resides in the physical body and images of the textured body, musculature, strength, power, and dominance are located in the social construction of the male body (Messner 1988). Through these images the social construction and imagery of masculinity becomes unproblematically articulated in sport (J. A. Hargreaves 1986).

In contrast to the social construction of the male body and men's sport as independent and "complete" images, the female body and women's sport are socially constructed in relation to the male body and "male" sport. Moreover, comparisons are made in ideological terms of subordination. Thus, the female body is viewed as inferior, passive, weak, feminine -- a social construction that reinforces the myth of female frailty and inadequacy (Martin 1987).

These images related to women's biology go virtually unchallenged despite women's entry into sport and physical activity because the contradiction of frailty in conjunction with the image of physically active woman is accommodated through mediated sport messages which convey meanings that are shared and understood not as part of sport but as "women's sport." These assumptions also would explain our data related to different expectations and qualified descriptions commentators offered with respect to the women's game.

Thus, despite the "new" image (or social construction) of an active, physical woman who participates in sport, the old message is still retained through selective interpretation and production of women's athletic events. In sum, underlying meanings remain the same: (a) males continue to represent the accepted standard of performance or norm, while the women's game represents a derivative (and inferior) form of the men's game; (b) instead of recognizing the image of active, physical woman within its own right, it is simply one of not measuring up to that of men; and (c)
presentation of visual and verbal cues reinforce existing gender stereotypes that are so deeply embedded in our belief system that they underlie and to some degree dictate media practice (albeit in insidious and unconscious fashion).

Telecasts of women's basketball represent a subtle contradiction of sorts, because through their scheduling of programs the networks grant a certain degree of legitimacy to women's basketball -- which suggests that previous barriers for women's sport have been overcome; yet, at the same time the networks convey and transmit gender stereotypic ideology.

Although we found few blatant forms of sexist media coverage, we did find subtle differences in commentary that, aided by selective production techniques, imposed a particular view of women's basketball. On the one hand networks seem to be making a conscious effort to give women's sport visibility -- conveying the image and message of "equal treatment." On the other, our data suggest that network commentary still tends to undermine this message by reproducing images and descriptions that subtly devalue, trivialize, and marginalize women's basketball by conveying ambiguous messages relative to women's bodies, physical attributes, and limitations of skill.

While continued sensitization efforts may help eliminate some of these contradictions, the mere fact a woman has achieved status as an elite athlete does not exempt her from underlying ideological constraints (Williams, Lawrence, and Rowe 1986). The power of this gender ideology is not only evident in differential coverage of telecasts, but also in the limited opposition to such patterns.

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NOTES

1. Although this paper focuses exclusively on the verbal commentary contained in the telecasts, several other coverage dimensions were also examined during our analysis of the videotapes. For example, differential coverage was noted in such areas as camera shots/angles, graphics, and advertising.

2. It should be mentioned that televised coverage of the women's Final Four basketball tournament by CBS was part of a larger lucrative television package granting CBS rights to the men's NCAA tournament. Inclusion of the women's finals in this television package stemmed from pressures placed on CBS by the NCAA who in turn was responding to internal pressures from advocates of women's sport.