

STRONG, ATHLETIC WOMEN CAN BE JUST AS INSPIRING AS THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS, SO WHEN IS MEDIA COVERAGE OF WOMEN'S SPORTS GOING TO IMPROVE, ASKS **Mischa Merz.**

girls v boys



There is no better place than the sporting field to smash a myth, something women have been doing comprehensively for more than 100 years. They've shown they would not, as Victorian-era people believed, die from overexertion or be harmed by either watching or taking part in sport. They can have babies and play on, and even be outstanding athletes while still looking feminine.

But what will it take for women's sport to get an audience? The recent enthusiasm for the FIFA Women's World Cup showed another seismic shift might be in the wings. Broadcasters and other media could capitalise on that and win over more viewers and more dollars, tapping into all those female viewers being starved of content they can connect with.

Women's sport comprises only nine per cent of sports coverage in Australia. In 1980 it was two per cent, so it could, and has, been worse. Only during the Olympics, when it's almost 50-50, does it change, which goes to show that where there's a will, there's a way – and plenty of spectators. Exposure seems to be the final hurdle in this single-sex obstacle race.

Women's tennis is the rare exception when it comes to both coverage and remuneration. Tennis, for some reason, has always been permissible for the "ladies", even those delicate Victorian-era dames. Way back in 1884, women were competing alongside men at Wimbledon – perhaps because tennis is graceful, non-contact and can be played nicely in a skirt.

Generally speaking, sporting prowess is masculine: it's aggressive, heroic and, at times, brutal. The more that women display these characteristics, the more they upset the idea that this is exclusively male territory. The reality is, while it might be masculine, it's not only for men. Women are as capable in these areas as men, just as men are also capable of feminine displays of grace, nuance and co-operation – also necessary in sport.

And perhaps because of its masculine nature, sport has been a hot potato for feminism, too, especially its second wave in the '70s and '80s that branded all

masculine pursuits as barbaric, especially anything that involved aggression. In the mid '80s, theorists like Lois Bryson suggested that in a truly equal society, competitive sport must disappear. "Sport", she wrote in 1987, "is so thoroughly masculinised that it seems unlikely it can be reclaimed to serve women's interests."

No wonder progress has been so slow: it's been hampered by both genders. For decades female athletes were caught in a trap, forced to trade femininity for physical accomplishment by disapproving men while being implicitly accused of betrayal by the sisterhood.

But now it seems there is a third wave of feminism cheering them on, embracing not just the female athlete but the sexual appeal of her body as well. At last we might be permitted a genuinely "empowering" sexuality that doesn't involve pole dancing or glamorous helplessness. Strong, fit bodies are sexy, whether it's David Beckham or Stephanie Rice. Complaints about objectification have diminished somewhat since everyone buys into it. Slowly but surely, cultural obstacles are falling away.

Yet still the media coverage is meagre, especially for team sports. Individual athletes like surfer Stephanie Gilmore and tennis star Samantha Stosur get plenty of airtime and sponsorship dollars, so perhaps the force of numbers in a team is too unsettling. Men don't want masses of women running around showing up their own inadequacies. No matter how hopeless and weak and slow the male spectator is, the sporting male that represents him on the field is still on the right team when it comes to sex. And no male wants to be out-done by a bunch of girls. Better to brand them slow and boring instead.

But the reality is that most female elite athletes would whoop the average male punter's arse. Maybe that, and the display of female athleticism en masse, is what scares them. The current female marathon champion is running at the same pace as the men's champion of 1950. The men who won gold medals in swimming at the 1932 Olympics wouldn't even have qualified for the women's finals in Beijing. And in boxing, the former female world champion Lucia Rijker has been proven in tests to punch harder than a male Olympic boxer in the same weight class.

It seems the players themselves are the most persuasive arguments for more women's sports coverage. They just need to be given a chance to show what they've got. Often, women's sporting contests can win over even the most die-hard male chauvinist, which means the potential to expand the audience is there. Increasing numbers of active women in the general community also want to watch

their own games being played at elite levels.

In the end, it might be a commercial argument that wins a bigger share of the air time. That's the view of the coach of the NSW Swifts netball team, Julie Fitzgerald. "I strongly believe that women's sport should not cry poor and beg for coverage," she said recently. "We must be proud and convince media of what they are missing out on,

not demand equal coverage for the sake of equal coverage or just because we are women."

Interestingly, too, a recent report on women's soccer showed players wasted less time faking injuries, there were fewer injuries and fouled players got up more quickly than men. All this makes the game run more smoothly and arguably better to watch.

It might take an Olympic year to bring women to the forefront, but it might not take an Olympic effort to keep them there. Not any more. ●

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