

Women in sport

Dropping the ball: media coverage of women's sports

Here are two statistics: 1) ninety-seven per cent of Brits know Wayne Rooney plays football; 2) less than twenty per cent know about Rachel Yankey, the star of England's women's team. These numbers provide a snapshot of women's football in the UK. Women's football teams have been playing for more than 100 years in Britain, but few people seem to know much about them. The same is true for women's sport in general.

Women play sport but not on TV

One obvious reason for this lack of awareness is the scarcity of media coverage. Although women participate in sport and enjoy watching sport, they don't often see sporting stars of their own gender in mainstream media. Women's sport gets only five per cent of media sports coverage. This has far-reaching effects.

Money matters

A low media profile makes it difficult to get sponsorship. Unless TV and newspapers cover women's sport, sponsors will not support it. If women's sports cannot tap into big advertising budgets, then female athletes' salaries and prizes will continue to be depressed and the financial success of women's leagues will be difficult to achieve. At the moment, women's sport receives only 0.5 per cent of all sports sponsorship money.

Role models

A further setback caused by poor media coverage is a lack of well-known sportswomen to inspire girls to take up sport. Nicola Adams, who won the first Olympic women's boxing gold medal, said: "Girls saw me on TV, and now we have a seventy-six per cent increase in women taking up boxing. TV made a massive difference."

Well played but what was she wearing?

Many sports fans say there is a double standard in the way women's sports are covered. When male athletes receive media attention, the media focus on their skilled performance. When female athletes receive media attention, the media often focus on their physical attractiveness or their clothing. The physically attractive tennis star Maria Sharapova is the highest earning female tennis player in the world, but she has won fewer tournaments than Serena Williams.

A false image

If people do not see women's sports in the media, it is easy to think that women are not involved in sports. In the past, this happened to women involved in history, art and science. We rarely hear their stories. Do we really want to do the same thing with sport?