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Why Don't We Watch More Women's Sports?

by [Katherine Schreiber](#) · 3 days ago · [Fitness](#)



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Think fast: First thing that comes to mind when someone says "Women's Sports." Maria Sharipova's modeling career? Brandi Chastain's infamous 1999 [shirt-off](#)? Serena Williams' [emotional outbursts](#)? Or what [Candace Parker](#) didn't wear during her post-partum *ESPN The Magazine* photo shoot? Years of sports media [analysis](#) and consumer research [unfortunately suggest](#) that how women look gets more press than how well they play.

There are lots of theories as to why this is so (gender stereotypes, a male-dominated media, and lingering pseudoscientific claims surrounding the inferiority of women's bodies usually get the blame). But **one new study suggests the *real* reason fans aren't tuning in is because they simply don't have the time.**

Where My Girls At? — The Need-to-Know

Media researcher and professor of communications at University of Tennessee [Erin Whiteside surveyed](#) 19 heterosexual, married women — most of whom were white and had children — about why they did or did not watch women's games. The majority reported that the biggest determinant was whether they had a moment to spare.

"Women's sports consumption tends to be dictated by their responsibilities in the home," Whiteside explains. "What they watch is largely a function of what's on at the moment."

Respondents also expressed that viewing sports was a way of connecting with their husbands, meaning they'd follow their man's lead in terms of choosing which channels to stick to. (And since their men typically preferred watching guys go head to head, most gals were stuck staring at Y chromosomes compete.)

When given a choice, however, the majority of subjects opted to watch gymnastics, figure skating, and cheerleading — sports embodying the stereotypes of grace and form that are often culturally characterized as feminine.

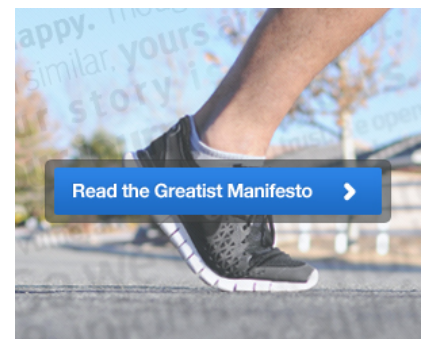
Whiteside's study has some pretty serious limitations. For one, the sample size was just 19-people strong and most of the women were taken from similar cultural backgrounds. Single women, for example, may not be as affected by domestic factors, or be lured into watching what their boyfriends watch. More importantly, not all women are married with kids, nor does every female strive to

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conform to the stereotype presented in Whiteside's study. (Whiteside acknowledges that her survey was limited in scope, and she hopes to further extend inquiries to different female social groups, ethnicities, and ages.) But if Whiteside's study isn't the end-all be-all, why is viewership for women's sports lower than for men? Surely busy moms can't be solely responsible for reduced ratings.

Earning the Title — The Debate

The number of girls getting their games on has been growing by leaps and bounds. Sports, once the domain of men, is very much a co-ed endeavor. In 1972, the U.S. government introduced [Title IX](#) which required federally funded schools to include an equal number of men's and women's sports teams. By 1999, women's varsity league participation grew by an estimated [977 percent](#) and by 2006, a total of [8,702](#) all-girls sports teams existed across the U.S. Today [around 200,000](#) women are estimated to be involved in collegiate-level sports.

Yet fans and followers of women's sports have *not* grown at the same rate that their participation has. Is there simply less of a demand for women's sports? And, if so, why? There are lots of theories (some legit, some bogus). We take a look at two of the most popular ones:

1. Press-tosterone

One theory is that women don't watch sports because the sports press is dominated by men, both on the field and off. For every one woman sportscaster, there exists about [48 male sportscasters](#). [On the page](#), 94 percent of sports editors are men, as are 90 percent of assistant sports editors.

"The sports departments of big time newspapers, magazines, TV and radio shows continue to be dominated by men," says University of California, Riverside's Chair of Media and Cultural Studies, Toby Miller — a large majority of whom, he adds, possess a rather [traditional mindset](#).

2. Tribal Roots

Another theory turns the clock back to evolution. Concordia University Evolutionary Psychologist and *Consuming Instinct* author Gad Saad sees the disparity as having deeper roots. "Men likely prefer to watch other men contend because of their [ancestral] inclinations to affiliate with, or evaluate, their competition," Saad says.

(Indeed, affiliation is a huge part of getting into the game — even if only from your couch: Men's testosterone levels peak when their favored team kills the competition and falls drastically when their favored team loses.[1].)

Saad argues that this evolutionarily ingrained bias may also incline (straight) women towards watching bravery, daring, and other virile traits in male athletes as a means of evaluating potential mates.

Are We There Yet? — The Takeaway

Female athletes have made [significant strides](#) over the decades. But many women's sports advocates say **there's still room to grow**. Whether due to a male-dominated press, evolutionary ticks, or simply lack of time, viewership for women's sports is significantly lower than men's.

Stay tuned as sports media analysts and scholars continue seeking explanations as to why female athletes haven't yet achieved as strong a status in sports as men.

What's your take on the state of women's sports? Are studies like the one Whiteside conducted inevitably biased or right on the money? Join the conversation below.

Works Cited

1. [Testosterone changes during vicarious experiences of winning and losing among fans at sporting events](#). Bernhardt, P.C., Dabbs, J.M. Jr., Fielden, J.A. University of Utah, Department of Educational Psychology, Salt Lake City. Physiology & Behavior. 1998 Aug;65(1):59-62. [[↔](#)]

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