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Jocks for Justice: How Sports Media Reflects and Propagates Societal Narratives

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Claremont McKenna College

**Jocks for Justice:
How Sports Media Reflects and Propagates Societal Narratives**

submitted to
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And
Professor Jennifer Friedlander

by
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ABSTRACT

Sports presents one of the most popular forms of entertainment in society, and sports media continues to expand its billion-dollar influence through new television deal and broadcasting rights. But with a population of journalists who are overwhelmingly white, straight, and male, sports media is promoting the hegemony of said image by reproducing stereotypes in its broadcasts to audiences around the country. Mainstream media regurgitates these stereotypes in their coverage of minority athlete by portraying black players as unintelligent or “thug”-ish, women as “butch”, and gay athletes as effeminate. These representations allow for the perpetuation of the white, heterosexual male narrative throughout society while sidelining those who do not fit the description. But just as sports media is growing in popularity, so too is the athlete activist. Starting in 2013, today’s athletic superstars are now using their exalted platforms to address societal issues and speak on behalf of marginalized groups that are often ignored or misrepresented by traditional media narratives. The efforts of Colin Kaepernick, Billie Jean King, and Jason Collins in fighting against the system and these stereotypes will reveal how certain athletes are represented in the media and their unique position of changing the discussion and inspiring others to challenge societal norms. The growing popularity of social media and its use as a tool for social activism will also be examined, particularly as it has revolutionized the culture of athlete activism.

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	6
CHAPTER I. <i>How We Got Here—A Brief History of Social Activism in Sport</i>	13
CHAPTER II. <i>The Power of Mainstream Media</i>	21
CHAPTER III. <i>As Simple as Black and White—Implicit Bias in Sports Media</i>	28
CHAPTER IV. <i>Aesthetics over Athletics—Gender Bias in Sports Media</i>	45
CHAPTER V. <i>Heterosexual Heroes and the Macho Mindset—Homophobia in Sports and Sports Media</i>	60
CONCLUSION <i>Post-Game</i>	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	76

Introduction: Pre-Game

Some paint their faces, some wear their lucky shirts, and some pray to their gods. Whatever their ritual of choice, it is obvious that sports elicits a level of obsessive fandom not regularly seen in other areas of society. Every year millions of people flock to stadiums, tune in on television, and subscribe to magazines to cheer on the best of the best as they battle for victory. Fans live and die by their teams, and moments of triumph—as well as moments of failure—can be remembered for a lifetime. In America, the sports industry is expected to reach \$73.5 billion by 2019, up 13 billion from 2014, with much of this increase in revenue derived from media rights.¹ These numbers reflect a trend showing that fans are forgoing the in-game experience of watching games live in favor of the convenience of watching them from home, on the television or the Internet. As fans continue to opt into the much more affordable option of watching games remotely, sports media is expanding its coverage while also gaining influence over the overall viewer experience.

As sports media gains prominence in the home, however, it is extending its particular brand of influence that many media scholars have found to promote the hegemony of the white, heterosexual male. Traditional mainstream media, including newspapers, film, radio, and television, have profound influences on shaping the discourse around certain issues within society, as well as shaping and maintaining its

¹ Heitner, Darren. “Sports Industry To Reach \$73.5 Billion By 2019.” *Forbes*, *Forbes Magazine*, 28 Mar. 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/darrenheitner/2015/10/19/sports-industry-to-reach-73-5-billion-by-2019/#30788a8c1b4b.

popular culture.² The growing relationship between sports and media, as Boyle, Raymond, and Haynes researched in their book *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture*, is forcing the sports world to become increasingly involved in “reproducing, naturalizing and even constructing values, attitudes and sometimes prejudices which circulate in wider society.”³ While researching race and content analysis of sports media, Jacco Van Sterkenburg et al. discovered that the media does indeed portray minorities in stereotypical ways that both reinforce and confirm social inequalities in society.⁴ Certain sectors of the media tend to regurgitate stereotypes in their coverage of the “non-traditional” athlete, such as portraying black players as unintelligent or “thug”-ish, women as “butch”, and gay athletes as effeminate. Their continuous and rarely discussed myopic, stereotypical portrayal of these minority athletes allows the predominantly white heterosexual narrative to be perpetuated throughout society, continuing to endorse hegemonic ideals that dominate our culture and sideline those who do not fit the description. This exemplifies the importance of bringing awareness to the power of the media and the ways in which it guides these narratives that continue to suppress those who are different.

But just as sports media is growing in popularity, so too is the athlete activist. The traditional belief that athletes should avoid politics at all cost, that they should just “shut up and play,” as political sportswriter Dave Zirin so eloquently puts it, is gradually being

² Boyle, Raymond, and Richard Haynes. *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010. P. 1

³ *Ibid*, 15.

⁴ Sterkenburg, Jacco Van, et al. “Race, Ethnicity, and Content Analysis of the Sports Media: a Critical Reflection.” *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2010, pp. 819–839., P. 820

replaced by the new norm of the socially active athlete.⁵ In his book *Game Over*, Zirin shows how today's athletic superstars are starting to use their voices to address societal issues and speak on behalf of marginalized groups that are often ignored or misrepresented by traditional media narratives. These athletes have been given an exalted platform that, until now, has traditionally been viewed as a sacred sphere used for entertaining fans and audiences, not for challenging social norms. Theirs is a job of entertainment, offering thrills rather than opinions, touchdowns instead of protests; presenting viewers with an opportunity to escape the mundane of their everyday lives and plunge into a world of suspense and intrigue, of emotion and raw power, if only briefly. The best players, the ones who are constantly asserting their superiority on the field, are adored by the media and fans alike, often becoming role models in a community.

But as the country becomes increasingly divided, these role models are recognizing their influential positions and ability to give a voice to the groups they represent with the hope of enacting positive change for themselves and others like them both in the sports world and in society at large. To research this topic, I will be analyzing the case studies of Colin Kaepernick, Billie Jean King, and Jason Collins, each of whom have become the most dominant representations of their respective minority communities to fight against the system. While none of them spoke out directly against media portrayal of minorities, their positions create an opportunity to critically analyze racism, gender bias, and homophobia in traditional sports media.

While many critics maintain that sports should remain an apolitical sphere, political activism and sports are not two mutually exclusive entities, and athlete protests

⁵ Zirin, Dave. *Game over: How Politics Has Turned the Sports World Upside Down*. New Press, 2013. P. 9

are neither new nor innovative. As far back as 1967, Muhammad Ali made waves inside and outside of the sporting world when he refused to enlist in the Vietnam War because of his own objections to the war. As the first notable athlete to risk his career for a protest, Ali was mostly condemned for his lack of patriotism and reviled by media and society alike. His actions, however, quickly inspired others, including the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics. By lowering their heads and lifting their fists during the national anthem, Smith and Carlos were using their sports celebrity to bring awareness to the inequality they felt pervasive within their country and society. While mainstream America condemned them for their “black power radicalism” and labeled “black-skinned storm troopers” by sportscaster Brent Musburger, the two sprinters insist on the necessity of their actions. “[The protest] was “a cry for freedom and for human rights,” said Smith. “We had to be seen to be heard.”⁶

Nowadays, however, athletes do not have to resort to bowing their heads to make a point (unless, of course, they want to). The advent of social media has greatly facilitated a person’s ability to immediately voice their opinions to the rest of the world, with the result that it is now commonplace to see a celebrity or an athlete addressing social issues on their online accounts. By creating a space for athletes to more easily express themselves and to communicate directly with their fans, social media eliminates the possibility of the media misrepresenting their words or actions, a factor which had deterred some athletes from speaking out in the past.⁷ When LeBron James wanted to

⁶ Smithsonian.com. “Olympic Athletes Who Took a Stand.” Smithsonian Institution, 1 Aug. 2008, www.smithsonianmag.com/articles/olympic-athletes-who-took-a-stand-593920/.

⁷ Zaru, Deena. “Why Athletes Are Getting More Political in the Age of Trump.” CNN, Cable News Network, 14 Aug. 2017. www.cnn.com/2017/02/10/politics/donald-trump-colin-kaepernick-athletes-activism-sports/index.html.

protest the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, he posted a picture on Twitter of the Miami Heat players dressed in hoodies similar to the one Martin had been wearing and captioned it #WeWantJustice.⁸ Though James had spent years crafting an apolitical image, this posts marks a shift in his character as he begins to use his celebrity to voice his outrage with police brutality and systemic oppression, oftentimes relying on the quick and easy social media platforms to most effectively broadcast his beliefs. “Let’s use this moment as a call to action to all professional athletes to educate ourselves, explore these issues, speak up, use our influence,” said James at a sports award ceremony in an effort to promote social change. “We all have to do better.”⁹

James certainly faced backlash for his hoodie picture, and for several subsequent politically-charged posts, underscoring the fact that social media does not act to eliminate criticism; rather, it provides an opportunity for athletes and other members of society to engage in honest discourses that challenge ideals more directly, untainted by media bias. In her book *Alternative and Activist New Media*, Leah Lievrouw writes that the “marginal or alternative views” presented online “confront dominant media culture, politics, and power,” while allowing people to “work around the fixity of traditional media technologies and institutional systems.”¹⁰ The growth of social media into a site of societal discourse has facilitated athletes efforts to engage with their fans as well as to

⁸ Zirin, 2.

⁹ ESPN News Services. “LeBron James on Social Activism: 'We All Have to Do Better'.” ABC News, ABC News Network, 13 July 2016, abcnews.go.com/Sports/lebron-james-social-activism/story?id=40563925.

¹⁰ Lievrouw, Leah A. *Alternative and Activist New Media*. Polity Press, 2015., P. 4

participate in social activism, prompting Zirin to comment on how “how these norms and power structures have been negotiated, struggled with, and resisted” by athletes.¹¹

These efforts by athletes to challenge conventions rather than playing into them underscores my own interest in researching this topic. Sports play a major role in many people’s lives, from youth leagues to high school teams to adult fandom, and media representation of minorities has implications that extend beyond the sports field. By exploring racism, gender bias, and homophobia in mainstream sports media, I hope to portray how the media maintains the social superiority of the white, heterosexual male by using covert yet demeaning language when discussing these minorities or neglect them entirely. Though obviously derogatory remarks have largely been eradicated from modern discourse, the inferior ideals persist despite progress in other sectors of society, as will be discussed. “Sports culture shapes societal attitudes, relationships, and power arrangements,” writes Zirin. “It frames the ways in which we understand and discuss issues of gender, race, and, and class.”¹² Society’s obsession with sports and the media’s ability to control the discussion around these issues necessitates a closer investigation into how athletes are demanding more equitable coverage and these effects on the broader communities. By bringing awareness to the disparity in media, perhaps this paper can prompt people to actively challenge these representations rather than passively absorbing them.

¹¹ Zirin, 10.

¹² Zirin, 10.

Chapter I: How We Got Here—A Brief History of Social Activism in Sport

In opposition to those calling for the separation of sports and politics, it is important to remember that athletes are first and foremost people, and the issues that affect the rest of society impact them as well. Today's abundance of activism was preceded by notable examples from Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, and Billie Jean King, athletes were some of the first to use their podiums to protest the status quo, even risking their careers and social statuses to speak for issues they believed in. At the time their actions were fiercely criticized by both mainstream media and society, who vilified them for finding fault in the country and labeled them as social agitators. While they immediately became champions for their causes, they also became defined by them, and would keep these labels—and the responses that came with them—throughout their lives. Although attitudes have shifted in favor of these athletes and athlete protests in general, the critical atmosphere pervasive during the latter half of the 20th Century discouraged athletes for a period from themselves speaking out; for many years it was seen as career suicide to engage in social activism. The ensuing silence from the sports community on both the political and social front further impressed the notion of politics and sports as separate entities. But as time has progressed, technology has advanced, and so too has society; many of the values held in the 60s and 70s have been replaced by more tolerant and open-minded ones.¹³ As technology facilitates communication and speech, society has become more accepting, even encouraging, of

¹³ Cohn, Bob. "21 Charts That Explain American Values Today." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 27 June 2012. www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/06/21-charts-that-explain-american-values-today/258990/.

social activism, creating more politically vocal norms to replace those of silence. The athletes who were once defamed for their stances are now revered for their courage in speaking up at a time when no one else was doing so. Comparing their experiences with today's more receptive reactions clearly demonstrates the drastic shift in values within both the sports world and society, allowing for a better understanding of current attitudes towards these athletes.

To better appreciate the protests of the past, let us start by examining one of the most significant and celebrated figures of the 20th century, who was suspended at the peak of his career for his outspoken stance against the Vietnam war.¹⁴ At the start of 1967, Muhammad Ali was the Heavyweight Champion of the world and an outspoken member of the Muslim community. When later that year he was drafted to join the Vietnam War, he refused in support of his beliefs as a black Muslim and his own opposition to the war.¹⁵ “Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs?” he said. “No Vietcong ever called me a nigger.”¹⁶ For his recalcitrance he was found guilty of draft evasion, stripped of his heavyweight title, suspended from boxing, fined \$10,000, and sentenced to 5 years in prison. He was also labeled a national pariah. At a time when the Vietnam War was still popular, journalists and sportswriters across the country criticized him for his

¹⁴ Staff, TIME. “The 20 Most Influential Americans of All Time.” Time, Time, 24 July 2012. newsfeed.time.com/2012/07/25/the-20-most-influential-americans-of-all-time/slide/muhammad-ali/.

¹⁵ Quote from Calamur, Krishnadev. “Muhammad Ali and Vietnam.” The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 4 June 2016. www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/muhammad-ali-vietnam/485717/.

¹⁶ Orkand, Bob. “‘I Ain’t Got No Quarrel With Them Vietcong.’” The New York Times, The New York Times, 27 June 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/opinion/muhammad-ali-vietnam-war.html?_r=0..

“un-American” position, calling him a “disgrace to his country, his race, and what he laughingly calls his profession,” orated television host David Susskind. “He is a felon in the United States.”¹⁷ Unable to box, he became a prominent speaker on college campuses, eloquently fueling the anti-war sentiment already popular among many of the youths. When the Supreme Court finally overturned his conviction four years later, the “Greatest of all time” was able to return to the sports that brought him so much fame and power, though fans claim he was never quite as good as he had been.

Despite the personal costs he accrued and the criticism he received, Ali never expressed regret for his decisions and his anti-Vietnam stance is now seen as one of his greatest moments rather than one of his weakest. “I would like to say to those of the press and those of the people who think that I lost so much by not taking this step, I would like to say that I did not lose a thing,” Ali said. “I have gained a lot. Number one, I have gained a peace of mind. I have gained a piece of heart.”¹⁸ His refusal to undermine his principles and stand up for racial equality in America brought him more than the glory—it brought him respect. After his death in 2016, the media praised him first and foremost for his devotion to and impact on the Civil Rights movement, remembering him as an activist first and an athlete second. “It would earn him enemies on the left and the right, make him reviled, and nearly send him to jail,” President Obama said in a speech praising the boxer’s accomplishments. “But Ali stood his ground. And his victory helped us get used to the America we recognize today.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Krishnadev.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

As the first and most prominent example of athletic activism in the country's recent memory, Ali's sacrifice for moral integrity to this day inspires other athletes to speak up for what they believe is right. One year after Ali refused to enlist, Carlos and Smith famously raised their fists in a Black Power salute while the national anthem played in the 1968 Olympics, which became one of the most iconic sports image of the 20th Century.²⁰ They were booed off the podium and immediately suspended from the Olympics and the U.S. national team for their protest of the treatment of black Americans and other minorities. Both are now hailed as Civil Rights icons.²¹ Billie Jean King felt her own pursuit of equality for women's sports ran parallel to Ali's efforts just a few years before, and mentions in her autobiography how whenever they would run into each other, Ali would whisper in her ear "Billie Jean King! You're the queen!"²² Though her own path for recognition greatly differed from Ali's, the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" provides another example of the alternative ways that athletes bring attention to their issues. Tired of constantly being deemed inferior to her male counterparts, King's decided to battle the self-described chauvinist and ex-tennis champion Bobby Riggs, her victory over which secured a newfound respect for female sports. These different types of social activism highlight athletes who used their standings to tackle issues others were too afraid to, and risked their careers in the process. Reflecting the white, male dominance in society, the

²⁰ Pumerantz, Zack. "The 50 Most Iconic Pictures in Sports History." Bleacher Report, Bleacher Report, 12 Apr. 2017. bleacherreport.com/articles/1328711-the-50-most-iconic-pictures-in-sports-history.

²¹ Brown, DeNeen L. "They Didn't #TakeTheKnee: The Black Power Protest Salute That Shook the World in 1968." The Washington Post, WP Company, 24 Sept. 2017. www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/09/24/they-didnt-takeaknee-the-black-power-protest-salute-that-shook-the-world-in-1968/?utm_term=.d42cdbdd998f.

²² Gitlin, Marty. Billie Jean King: Tennis Star & Social Activist. ABDO Pub. Co., 2011. P.55

media was quick to denounce the black- and girl-powered movements until such a time as now when society is more ready and willing to accept them and their status as equals.

For a while the stories of Ali and Carlos and Smith seemed like cautionary tales—don't speak or the media will come after you—yet today the biggest names in sports are the ones using their celebrity to take a stand on political issues, a shift that has as much to do with social media as it does with changing values. The inception of social media and its growing dominance in society has enabled athletes to easily voice their opinions publicly and connect directly with their fans rather than having to go through traditional forms of media. “It's like athletes have woken up to what actors and musicians have known forever: I have this amazing platform—why not use it?” said tennis star Martina Navratilova, another champion for women's equality in sports.²³ Athletes who might be used to the media spinning their words to fit an angle or taking them out of context can trust the hundred-and-forty characters more than the “old school” media, granting them the ability to speak directly to their fans. In terms of enacting change or addressing issues, platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have been able to initiate dialogues fuller and involving than anything that comes from Capitol Hill, where politicians are apt to speak in circles instead of the truth.²⁴

This has been especially important given the recent shift in the past ten years of a more divisive political culture, with a president who has ignited heated debates over race and social issues and turned them into mainstream problems. As many athletes have had personal experience with these issues, they feel incentivized to speak up and become

²³ Zirin, Dave. *Game over: How Politics Has Turned the Sports World Upside Down*. New Press, 2013.P.6

²⁴ *Ibid*, P.7

politically active in a way not seen in decades. "Sports is really no longer an escape from the real world that it used to be. Sports is a mirror of our society," said CNN Sports Analyst Christine Brennan. "I think because Trump is so controversial and because the things he's saying and doing run counter to what many people believe...athletes are finding their voice in a way that is reminiscent of the 1960s." Players themselves have noted the prominent change that has occurred recently, but while new platforms give rise to new abilities, so too do they come with new expectations and caveats. NFL player-turned-sports anchor Coy Wire notes that "back in the early 2000s, it was 'do not talk about it, keep your head down.' Basically, 'just stick to sports, you're an athlete.' But towards the end of my career it started to trend towards 'be smart, think before you click send on Twitter.'" ²⁵

These new attitudes reflect the change in culture from the 70s, a shift that among other things has resulted in an encouragement of player activism instead of criticism, though some are not happy with this more tolerant society. Supporters of the traditional view of sports as an escape from reality resent the entanglement of the sports world with politics. Dylan Gwinn, a sports talk show host and author of the book *Bias in the Booth*, yearns for the time when "people flocked to sports because they were fun and entertaining, even awe-inspiring at their best, and an escape from the BS and politically correct hysteria of the 'real world.'" ²⁶ Political commentary, which Gwinn illustrates as the "burdens of the real world [...] hung around your neck," rarely made its way onto the

²⁵ Zaru.

²⁶ Gwinn, Dylan. *Bias in the Booth: An Insider Exposes How the Sports Media Distort the News*. Regnery Publishing, 2015. Introduction.

entertainment-filled sports broadcasts.²⁷ Especially as sports industry has grown into a trillion-dollar-entity globally, athletes have evolved from people into brands and pushed the belief that, as Zirin phrases it, “the modern jock should never sacrifice commercial concerns for political principle.”²⁸ Their success revolved around the apolitical image they crafted for themselves, and becoming involved with social activism was seen as a detriment, costing them millions of dollars in endorsements and career opportunities.

But as much as conservative sports journalists might wish for a return to the old, the progressive shift in sports media is not the result of some left-wing conspiracy but rather a reflection of an increasingly liberal society. Just as the rest of society is experiencing a cultural awakening, athletes have been gaining off the field prominence for their social and cultural advocacy, helping to move the counterculture movement into mainstream society. Whereas previously athletes tried to ingratiate themselves with American mainstream, today’s athletes have more freedom to speak their mind or to take risky political stands.²⁹ This social awakening of sorts has also altered the way that we as audiences and fans interact with these athletes, as well as changed our expectations of them. Nowadays, it is not enough for an athlete to stay silent; those who do are supporting undesirable practices by not speaking out against them, such as a racist journalist or unenlightened politician.

Truly social media has made it almost impossible to not become involved in some manner, even if minutely by just retweeting someone else who is taking more action, by making it so easy to do so. With the click of a button, their opinions are out. It is

²⁷ Zaru.

²⁸ Zirin, P.3

²⁹ Zaru.

important, however, to remember that these small acts of activism were made possible by the struggles of legends like Ali and King, who forged a path that allowed others to follow in their stead with less criticism. But while athletes may be more active online and pushing for rights, and while society is more receptive of them doing so, this does not mean that the underlying issues are being solved or even critically challenged, especially within the world of sports. Though athletes are becoming more comfortable in speaking up for themselves and other minorities in the sports world, media bias continues to persist throughout, though the manner in which it is portrayed has changed. Above all, we must remember, rules the white heterosexual male.

Chapter II: The Power of Mainstream Media

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”
– Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*³⁰

As noted by Lievrouw, media has a significant impact on shaping societal discourses that reflect and maintain dominant ideals; sports media in particular is a multi-billion-dollar industry that is ever-expanding its markets and audience, as well as its influence. The more people who tune in to watch their favorite athletes compete, the more members of society are passively absorbing the stereotypes portrayed to them on their television screens, stereotypes that have been shaped by the hegemonic powers. Though the culture of sports has progressed alongside society, it has been at a much slower pace. Overtly derogatory comments may have disappeared from the discourse, demeaning undertones still pervade within the descriptions of players who do not fit the idealized athletic mold: white, straight, and male. Racist slurs may no longer be appropriate, but calling a black athlete a “thug” and referencing a woman’s sexual partners are still okay. These more subtly demeaning comments, when gone unnoticed, permeate the psyche of the audience and serve to maintain inferior stereotypes. To form a better understanding of how and why these representations are occurring, I explore the composition of the sports newsrooms and their involvement in perpetuating dominant ideals, applying the ideas Stuart Hall presents in his “Social Production of News” to a specific niche within media. As sports news is often thought of as a more trivial form of media, not much attention is given to its influence over the population at large; for this reason, I want to uncover how sports media affects societal narratives around social and

³⁰ Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. Progress Publishers, 1976.

political issues that have been promulgated by athletes, and why we as a society ought to be more aware of how the media is shaping our own responses to them.

Hall's understanding of how media "most actively and openly shape and structure public opinion" is the foundation for his argument that illustrates how mainstream media plays as a crucial role in linking social control with society.³¹ In analyzing the production of news, Hall emphasizes that the process is more complicated than corporations pushing narratives that reinforce their own positions of dominance, or at least not so blatantly. Certainly part of mainstream media's reproduction of dominant ideologies lies in its job as a corporation, featuring news they think audiences will pay attention to, but we must also look at how news is produced within the newsroom. Hall posits that the media looks to institutions and individuals within society who serve as "primary definers" of the news—that is, they are the ones defining what is newsworthy, while the media plays a "crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* [their] definitions."³² In reporting the events of the primary definers, however, the media plays no small role in choosing what the public sees and shaping how they perceive it, a process that Hall refers to as "agenda setting."³³ Within this agenda setting, the media makes the assumption that we, the audience, all occupy the same society with the same ideals, regardless of other factors. Obviously, this problematic perception disregards differences between social groups and their unique (dissimilar) perspectives. By choosing certain stories while ignoring others, and framing issues in certain manners, the media prioritizes dominant narratives that

³¹ Hall, Stuart. "The Social Production of News." *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, P.63

³² *Ibid*, 59.

³³ *Ibid*, 62.

support those in power. “The media, then, do not simply ‘create’ the news; nor do they simply transmit the ideology of the ‘ruling class’ in a conspiratorial fashion,” Hall summarizes. Nevertheless, they do play a “key role in reproducing the dominant field of the ruling ideologies,” whether intentionally or not.³⁴

Though Hall does not directly reference sports, as most news corporations are subsidiaries of major media conglomerates (ESPN by Disney, Sports Illustrated by Time, Inc., etc.) I find it relevant to apply his arguments to the more condensed sphere of sports. Indeed, Sterkenburg et al. discovered that sports commentators were more likely to portray athletic minorities in ‘stereotypical’ ways, leading to the promoting of racial, gender, and sexual inequalities in society.³⁵ As the go-to “experts” within this industry, sports journalists are the predominant people driving the discourse and the authors of the narrative within the sports world. Sterkenburg et al. note that live commentators especially, who rely on a stream-of-consciousness style of talking to keep up with the action, unconsciously draw on dominant racial ideologies as they have minimal time to process the broader implications of their words.³⁶ These reporters tend to emphasize certain traits about an athlete that often implicitly relate to their minority status, allowing implicit biases about race, sexuality, and gender to becoming embedded in both sports and mainstream commentary.

Although these assumptions can sometimes challenge pre-existing notions, Sterkenburg et al. note that they predominantly reinforce existing stereotypes.³⁷ Black

³⁴ Hall, 59-60.

³⁵ Sterkenburg, Jacco Van, et al. “Race, Ethnicity, and Content Analysis of the Sports Media: A Critical Reflection.” *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2010, P.820.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 820

³⁷ Sterkenburg et al, 831

athletes are celebrated for their physical prowess and their natural affinity for sports and athletic performance, while white athletes are promoted for their intellectual superiority.³⁸ The perception of black athletes as brawny but not brainy, while seemingly innocuous, implies that black players inherently lack the intellectual capabilities of their white brethren amidst a society that glorifies intelligence. Black success is achievable and congratulated in sport, so it is implied, but not in other social domains like business or politics.

Women's sports have grown tremendously since the implementation of Title IX in 1972, yet female athletes continue to be underrepresented, trivialized, and sexualized by the male-dominated sports media.³⁹ The media's representations do little to challenge the perception of women's sports as inferior to men's, just as it does little to challenge female inferiority in society. While the media has framed sports as an "inclusive, accepting institution for gays," sports journalists continue the tradition of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy that effectively silences homosexuality in sport.⁴⁰ The (minimal) coverage of both female and homosexual athletes, through their representations and the lack thereof, served to reinforce the supremacy of traditional notions of masculinity, in addition to re-emphasizing gender roles and supporting implicit homophobia.⁴¹

Sterkenburg et al. remind of the importance of such representations when they write:

The results of these studies have shown that, although overt and easily recognizable racist messages have largely disappeared from sport broadcasts, more covert ethnic and racial biases still occur. The most common stereotypes

³⁸ Ibid, 819

³⁹ Trolan, Eoin J. "The Impact of the Media on Gender Inequality within Sport." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 91, 2013, P. 216

⁴⁰ Kian, Edward M, et al. "I Am Happy to Start the Conversation': Examining Sport Media Framing of Jason Collins' Coming out and Playing in the NBA." *Sexualities*, vol. 18, no. 5-6, 2015, P. 618

⁴¹ Kian et al, 620

embedded in such broadcasts are those of the naturally gifted, strong, black male athlete, and the intelligent and hard-working, white male athlete. Such stereotypes are not racially or ethnically neutral since people attach inferior and superior values to them.⁴²

Although here they are referencing just black athletes, the results are the same for women and gay athletes as well. The media may be more politically correct in its language, yet their words are still weighted with derogatory remarks that undermine the abilities of such societal minorities. The ideological descriptions employed by the sport media are not intentionally trying to suppress athletes, but neither are they ideologically neutral: they are socially produced and situated in a hegemonic, white ideology that privileges white males above all others.⁴³

In his paper, Hall notes that the power of mainstream media derived from its monopoly on social knowledge; there simply were no other equally informative avenues.⁴⁴ With the invention of the Internet and social media site, however, people can get their information from a variety of different mediums and millions of different sources. Athletes, too, were once limited in forums of expression or of even connecting with fans. Nowadays, social media provides an even more intimate access to athletes, an unfiltered view into the minds of the players dominating our screens. In endorsing the new media, Lievrouw notes that the real power of social media lies in its ability to “present marginal or alternative views...[which] confront dominant media culture, politics, and power.”⁴⁵ Athletes using these platforms to address social issues as well as

⁴² Sterkenburg, 822

⁴³ Ibid, 828

⁴⁴ Hall, 64.

⁴⁵ Lievrouw, Leah A. *Alternative and Activist New Media*. Polity Press, 2015., P.2

audiences vocally condemning perceived sports media bias challenges these practices within sports media and intervenes in the cultural norms, pushing for change.⁴⁶

The media landscape has certainly made much progress in the past 30 years; women are no longer *explicitly* sexualized. Social media has encouraged athletes to speak up for themselves and for others, increasing awareness of sports and sports media insufficiencies. But the role of the journalist as gatekeeper has stayed the same: as “agenda setters” they control what the audience sees and how they see it; what they do not show is just as important as what they do show. Omitting female and gay athletes from sports narratives emphasizes the perceived dominance of straight males. Presenting black athletes as athletically superior yet academically inferior to their white teammates disseminates this inferiority to fans and audiences. Much of this has to do with the composition of the newsroom itself, which according to a ASNE newsroom census sports media specifically is 90% white and 90% male, and overwhelmingly straight.⁴⁷ As members of the dominant social group, the discourses they produce thus reflect the ideologies of their hegemony.⁴⁸

Both Hall and Sterkenburg stress the ability of the media to “reproduce and sustain definitions of the situation which favour the powerful.” Presenting minority athletes as inferior to white, heterosexual male ideal, shape the racial categories that people use when interacting with the wider world around them.⁴⁹ The broader consequence of this stereotyping is often ignored in broader discourse about sports

⁴⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁷ Morrison, Sara. “Media Is 'Failing Women'—Sports Journalism Particularly So.” Poynter, 19 Feb. 2014. www.poynter.org/news/media-failing-women-sports-journalism-particularly-so.

⁴⁸ Hylton, Kevin. 'Race' and Sport: Critical Race Theory. Routledge, 2009. P. 3.

⁴⁹ Hall, 65.

media, since sports media is generally not recognized as having broader societal implications.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Sterkenburg, 820.

Chapter III: As Simple as Black and White—Implicit Bias in Sports Media

It should be obvious by now that there exists a symbiotic relationship between black representation in media and black position in broader society. Within sports, the stereotype of the ‘natural’ black athlete, brawny but not brainy, as presented on television sustains the inferiority of the black male within the minds of the audience. Though much progress has been made since the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, racism remains alive and well in contemporary society, though here I focus mainly on the implicit bias that permeates a predominantly white sports media. Racial slurs might no longer be welcome on television, but black stereotypes are regularly broadcast in compliance with a white hegemony that does not realize the implications of their vocalized, if unconscious, biases. Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest of black discrimination and the ensuing reactions from both the media and society have exposed not only the underlying tensions between black athletes and mainstream media, but wider societal beliefs concerning black people. To some, Kaepernick is disrespectful to all that is valued in America, while to others he is the champion the black community has been awaiting since Muhammad Ali. Many within the media and society at large have attempted to deflect the issue by attacking the messenger himself and the way in which he stood (or knelt) for his beliefs, often ignoring the deeper implications of his message. Nevertheless, the media frenzy that has ensued has certainly revealed a need for a deeper discussion on the position of black people in society and the divide between those who believe in the necessity of this discussion and those who do not. The implicit bias within sports media, as members perpetuating the issue at hand, continues to affect athletes, though the fact that athletes are standing up and

being at least somewhat supported speaks volumes to the progress society has made since Ali first protested in 1967.

Kaepernick's protest has reignited the discussion over how black people, specifically black athletes, are represented in the media. The racial profiling and police discrimination that Kaepernick protest are real problems occurring in the United States, but the justice system is not the only institution that continues to demean racial minorities: so, too, does sports media in its representation of black athletes. Images of black male athletes, particularly those in the NFL, are the dominant portrayals of black masculinity. A Rolling Stone article discussing Kaepernick's protests points out that black men make up 6% of the population but represent almost 70% of players in the NFL, the professional league of the most popular sports in the country.⁵¹ "The NFL produces more images of Black males than any other source in the US combined. These images influence the social beliefs of Black masculinity," said Drew Brown, a critical race theorist at the University of Delaware. "Unfortunately, the NFL does not display or promote a proportionately accurate portrayal of Black masculinity." Although these players are glorified for their athletic prowess, there exists a stark difference between how they are portrayed on television versus their white teammates.⁵² Black athletes are consistently praised for their physicality but rarely for their intelligence, perpetuating the notion of the "black brute," while white players are lauded for their intellect. One notable

⁵¹ Jerkins, Morgan. "What Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest Tells Us About America." Rolling Stone, Rolling Stone, 29 Aug. 2016. www.rollingstone.com/sports/colin-kaepernicks-national-anthem-protest-w436704.

⁵² Brown, Drew D. "The Portrayal of Black Masculinity in the NFL: Critical Race Theory and the Images of Black Males." Critical Race Theory: Black Athletic Sporting Experiences in the United States, 2016, pp. 217–246.

example that Brown mentions is a post-game interview with Richard Sherman. After making a game-winning save that would advance the team to the Super Bowl, Sherman shouted “I’m the best corner in the game!” and bashed another player for being a “sorry excuse.” Brown notes how the “spirited display of emotion and confidence” evoked racist outrage.⁵³ After his outburst fans on social media labeled him as “arrogant” and a “thug,” a term that linguists say has become the new N-word, while TV stations repeatedly discussed the vitriol online to further associate Sherman with the word.⁵⁴

These images of black athletes starkly contrast those of white athletes and even white culture, where their different or abnormal behaviors are not only noticed but condemned. White people, Brown argues, often see these images of black masculinity that deviate from their own cultural norms as negative, even threatening, and “defiant to the behavioral standards set by White culture.”⁵⁵ Any form of dancing, speaking with self-affirmations, or verbalizing confidence is construed as arrogant, as illustrated by the debate over touchdown celebrations.⁵⁶ These popular end-zone dances were penalized by the league as “unsportsmanlike conduct,” but while the ruling seeks to curb what officials consider offensive celebrating, 91% of those receiving penalties were black.⁵⁷ After much criticism, the white-ruled NFL has since backed off from enforcing these violations and has even passed new rules to allow for the “fun” behavior, but the original controversy reiterates the idea that white people are made uncomfortable by minorities who stand out

⁵³ Ibid, 229

⁵⁴ Block, Melissa. “The Racially Charged Meaning Behind the Word ‘Thug’.” NPR, NPR, 30 Apr. 2015. www.npr.org/2015/04/30/403362626/the-racially-charged-meaning-behind-the-word-thug.

⁵⁵ Brown, 229

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Armour, Nancy. “Armour: The Real Reason behind Criticism of Cam Newton.” USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 29 Jan. 2016. www.usatoday.com/story/sports/columnist/nancy-armour/2016/01/28/cam-newton-dabbing-black-quarterback-super-bowl-racism/79485258/.

or attract attention to themselves. “When you have a minority [...] that stands out, you tend to make correlations that are usually wrong...because it fits in with our typical stereotypes,” writes Cynthia Frisby, a professor at Ithaca College who is studying the stereotyping of black athletes. When whites see a black player dancing, she continues, they think that he is showing off, whereas a white player doing so is normal as he does not stand out.⁵⁸ The media’s emphasis on the ‘natural’ physical talents of black people and their showboat displays sustains the belief in the differences between white and black, the sports world becoming an image factory that Boyle et al. emphasize as propagating our racial preoccupations.⁵⁹

Many of the images of black masculinity presented in mainstream media, particularly those of black athletes, are based on the implicit bias of a media that the American Society of News Editors finds is 90% white.⁶⁰ Live game commentators especially, who must speak quickly to keep up with the rate of play while also entertaining audiences, often speak before they have time to process the implications of their words, relying on racial stereotypes assumptions without even realizing and despite best intentions. In 2009, CBS sportscaster Gus Johnson not-so-subtly described Chris Johnson, a black running back for the Tennessee Titans, as “he’s got getting-away-from-the-cops speed.”⁶¹ In 2012, before Kaepernick became a household name for other reasons, journalist David Whitley wrote, “Kaepernick is going to be a big-time

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Boyle, Raymond, and Richard Haynes. *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010. P.120

⁶⁰ Morrison, Sara. “Media Is 'Failing Women'—Sports Journalism Particularly So.” Poynter, 19 Feb. 2014. www.poynter.org/news/media-failing-women-sports-journalism-particularly-so.

⁶¹ Brown, 226

quarterback. That must make the guys at San Quentin (State Prison) happy.”⁶² While not intentionally trying to demean black players, their words reinforce pre-established notions of black inferiority and criminalization, Brown finds.⁶³ Although these are two more egregious incidents, they exemplify a culture within sports media that allows harmful stereotypes to creep into casual conversation and which can have broader societal implications.

Comes from a lack of understanding of the plights of the black community and their continued discrimination in society. Some believe, naively, that the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and African Americans receiving equal rights made racism magically disappear from the country; but just because it is illegal to segregate does not mean it is illegal to discriminate. Rather, it has been replaced by a more subtle form that goes largely unnoticed by white, majority populations.⁶⁴ Within the backlash of the anthem protests, Clay Travis of Fox Sports wrote an article calling Kaepernick “a fucking idiot” and questioned “what does the United States do to oppress black people?”⁶⁵ The myth that black populations in America are no longer oppressed only enhances many of the problems they face in their communities, problems that white people do not have and thus do not understand.⁶⁶ The same goes for the touch-down celebrations, Robert

⁶² Brown, 222

⁶³ Ibid, 217

⁶⁴ Ibid, 224

⁶⁵ Travis, Clay. “Colin Kaepernick Is an Idiot.” Outkick the Coverage, 27 Aug. 2016. www.outkickthecoverage.com/colin-kaepernick-is-an-idiot-082716/.

⁶⁶ Moore, Evan F. “Colin Kaepernick and What White Fans Don't Get About Black Athletes.” Rolling Stone, Rolling Stone, 31 Aug. 2016. www.azcentral.com/story/sports/soccer/2017/10/24/moore-us-soccer-megan-rapinoe-womens-pro-athletes-protest/797253001/.

Livingston and Erika V. Hall find: rather than seeking to understand their own implicit biases, white people criticize blacks instead.⁶⁷

A popular way of negating this implicit bias is by claiming to be racially “color-blind,” a term that strives to treat individuals equally without regard to race or ethnicity. Though a noble thought, the idea is decidedly flawed. While in theory it promotes judging people based on their character rather than the color of their skin, in practice it has been criticized as allowing white people to foist their culture onto non-whites, negating their unique traditions, experiences, and histories of oppression. White people, who according to psychologist Monnica Willins normally lack awareness of the privilege afforded them by the color of their skin, thus ignore the racial oppression of minorities and the differences in opportunities, perceptions, incomes that are affected by their non-whiteness.⁶⁸ To people of color, racial colorblindness encourages a society that denies their negative racial experiences and rejects their cultural heritage. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, author of *Racism without Racists*, argues that color-blind racism is a tool used to maintain dominant hegemonies within an ideological cover that allows for an institutionalized system of racial oppression in the post-Civil Rights era. This “shield” thus allows white people “to avoid being deemed racist while still participating and benefitting from subtle forms of racial oppression.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Curry, George E. “Black Quarterbacks Are Still Held to a Different Standard.” The Chicago Crusader, The Crusader Newspaper Group, 12 Feb. 2016. chicagocrusader.com/black-quarterbacks-are-still-held-to-a-different-standard/.

⁶⁸ Williams, Monnica. “Colorblind Ideology Is a Form of Racism.” Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 27 Dec. 2011. www.psychologytoday.com/blog/culturally-speaking/201112/colorblind-ideology-is-form-racism.

⁶⁹ Brown, 233

Though the discriminatory portrayals of black athletes are not a new phenomenon, Kaepernick's protest has pushed these issues to the forefront and made people more aware of how the media presents black athletes, as well as evincing how black people are viewed in society. The broader civil rights movement of Black Lives Matter, which began in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, campaigns against the violence and systematic oppression against black people.⁷⁰ Garnering widespread support from the black community, the movement has inspired many black athletes to use their celebrity platforms to lend a voice in addressing racial inequality within the United States. None, however, have been more committed or have lost as much as Kaepernick, now the ex-quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers who continues to risk his career for what he believes in.

The controversy surrounding the protests initially erupted on August 26, 2016, at the beginning of the NFL season when people noticed the then-quarterback sitting during the national anthem at the start of a game against the Green Bay Packers. Soon afterwards former Seahawks player and Green Beret Nate Boyer convinced Kaepernick to replace sitting with kneeling to show respect for the flag while preserving the intent of the demonstration.⁷¹ Kaepernick was soon joined by black teammate Eric Reid: together, they used their celebrity status to help the cause and bring about changes in the obviously flawed criminal justice system. Reid said the two football players had discussed many of the issues within the black community, "including systemic oppression against people of

⁷⁰ "About." Black Lives Matter, blacklivesmatter.com/about/.

⁷¹ Brinson, Will. "Here's How Nate Boyer Got Colin Kaepernick to Go from Sitting to Kneeling." CBSSports.com, CBS, 27 Sept. 2016. www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/heres-how-nate-boyer-got-colin-kaepernick-to-go-from-sitting-to-kneeling/.

color, police brutality and the criminal justice system,” as well as how to use their platform as professional athletes “to speak for those who are voiceless,” Reid wrote in an article for the New York Times.⁷² When interviewed, Kaepernick proclaimed that he was not going to “show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color... There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”⁷³ To them, protesting during the anthem was a way of highlighting the gap between what the flag is supposed to represent (freedom, equality) and the lived experiences of racial minorities.⁷⁴

Kaepernick’s protest and those who joined him, though peaceful in nature, are another example of minorities deviating from the white cultural norms and can be interpreted as a threat to white power. The waves they have sent throughout the football community as well as larger society has been met with expected defiance. Those critical of the protest—of which there were many—criticized Kaepernick for his lack of patriotism or, in recognizing his right to peaceful protest, were critical of the manner in which he did so, but few addressed in depth the deeper issues at the forefront of the protest. Opponents of the kneel, including members of the media, swarmed social media to condemn the kneel as disrespectful to the flag and calling Kaepernick “ignorant to the sacrifices of American soldiers.”⁷⁵ “It was one of the most disgraceful displays I’ve ever

⁷² Reid, Eric. “Eric Reid: Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 25 Sept. 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/opinion/colin-kaepernick-football-protests.html.

⁷³ Wyche, Steve. “Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem.” NFL.com, 27 Aug. 2016. www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem.

⁷⁴ Zirin, Dave. “Taking a Knee Is Not About Abstract Unity but Racial Justice.” The Nation, 30 Sept. 2017. www.thenation.com/article/taking-a-knee-is-not-about-abstract-unity-but-racial-justice/.

⁷⁵ Jerkins

seen by a professional athlete on his field of play," said Boomer Esiason, an ex-quarterback and current sports commentator. "You can't do this. I couldn't have been more...disgusted by Colin Kaepernick."⁷⁶ Some did not agree with the manner in which Kaepernick is protesting but respect his right to do so. After that first game against the Green Bay Packers, the 49ers organization released a statement lauding the national anthem while simultaneously supporting their players' rights "In respecting such American principles as freedom of religion and freedom of expression, we recognize the right of an individual to choose and participate, or not, in our celebration of the national anthem."⁷⁷ By focusing on the legality of the protest rather than the reason for it, these individuals and organizations neglect the real issues at stake in society, though one can argue that the very recognition of Kaepernick's ability to protest is in and of itself progress since Ali's Vietnam controversy of the 60s. Even then, however, Ali did not have the President of the United States demanding that he should leave to "find a country that works better for him," as President Trump wrote about Kaepernick.⁷⁸

The protest gained new momentum as well as a new message, unintentionally, after the President vocally attacked the recently unemployed quarterback at a rally in Alabama. "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's

⁷⁶ Lyles, Harry, and Tyler Tynes. "Colin Kaepernick's Journey from Football Stardom to NFL Exile." SBNation.com, 1 Sept. 2017. www.sbnation.com/a/colin-kaepernick-anthem-protest-timeline.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Schilken, Chuck. "Trump Slams NFL Free Agent Colin Kaepernick during a Rally in Kentucky." Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, 21 Mar. 2017. beta.latimes.com/sports/nfl/la-sp-donald-trump-colin-kaepernick-20170321-story.html.

fired’,” he said.⁷⁹ His provocative words incensed many athletes, both black and white, who respected Kaepernick’s intentions and his sacrifices despite themselves never having join him. Having the President of the country, someone who is supposed to support the marginalized groups within the country, so vocally condemn Kaepernick and his civil liberties inspired many to unify in opposition to the hate-filled statements. The outrage was immediate and prompted players and owners alike throughout the NFL decided to, as a team, take a knee, link arms, or skip the anthem entirely. The Seattle Seahawks, Tennessee Titans and Pittsburgh Steelers all stayed in their locker rooms while the anthem played, while every game across the league featured some form of demonstration.⁸⁰

While the display of support sweeping the league is commendable, it has obscured Kaepernick’s original intent of promoting awareness of racial inequality. Through his hate-filled tweets, Trump shifted the conversation from one of race to one of unity in a way that seemed to bring together both players and owners as well as advocates and opponents of the original protests. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who had previously only supported the legality of Kaepernick’s actions, issued a statement condemning the divisive statements and lack of respect for the NFL, its players, and the impact they have on their communities.⁸¹ But those who initially (and continue to)

⁷⁹ Graham, Bryan Armen. “Donald Trump Blasts NFL Anthem Protesters: ‘Get That Son of a Bitch off the Field’.” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 23 Sept. 2017.

www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests..

⁸⁰ “A Timeline of the NFL Protests from Colin Kaepernick’s to Now.” The Irish News, 25 Sept. 2017.

www.irishnews.com/magazine/daily/2017/09/25/news/a-timeline-of-the-nfl-protests-from-colin-kaepernick-s-to-now-1145483/.

⁸¹ Watson, Kathryn. “NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell Calls Trump’s Comments ‘Divisive.’” CBS News, CBS Interactive, 23 Sept. 2017. www.cbsnews.com/news/nfl-commissioner-roger-goodell-trump-responds-divisive-attack/.

oppose the original message who supported their the players by linking arms are as complicit as Trump in appropriating the protest to recast it through a simpler and more approachable lens of “unity.” The original political impact is thus critically diluted and lethal to the original cause. Those originally uncomfortable with the topic and not sure which side to support can eagerly embrace the brotherhood of players while not endangering their public image with connection to the defamation of the anthem.

“History has proven that white supremacy has a way of reframing the terrain of political debate—changing the goalposts, if you will, and policing the parameters of acceptable discourse when communities of color pose threats to its persistence” writes Zirin.⁸² In being able to change the issue at the heart of the movement, the dominant white personalities were able to convert the discussion into something more palatable, something less threatening to their own lives and livelihoods.

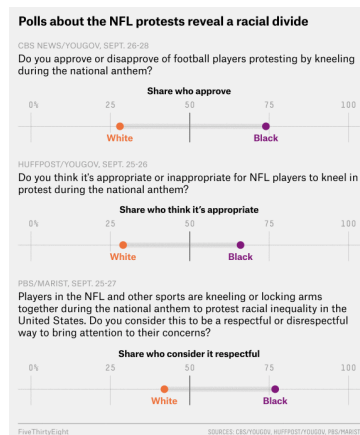
While it might be a stretch to assume that white society viewed Kaepernick’s protest as a direct affront to their social supremacy, it at least brings a certain awareness to the intrinsic beliefs within members of white communities in regards to race. Figure A, configured by FiveThirtyEight, illustrates just how racially divided the country is over the validity of the anthem protest and, it can be inferred, even how they feel towards black protests in general. According to a Reuters poll, 63% of white respondents disapproved of NFL players kneeling while only 17% of blacks did.⁸³ Although the phrasing of the question elicits different results, clearly there exists a dichotomy between

⁸² Zirin.

⁸³ Casteel, Kathryn. “How Do Americans Feel About The NFL Protests? It Depends On How You Ask.” FiveThirtyEight, FiveThirtyEight, 9 Oct. 2017. fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-do-americans-feel-about-the-nfl-protests-it-depends-on-how-you-ask/.

white and black beliefs. A separate poll conducted by the Pew Research Center on the importance of right to protest (without mentioning the NFL) found that 79% of Americans felt that “the right to conduct nonviolent protests was essential for an effective democracy.”⁸⁴ Apparently society believes in the right to protest, just not the right for blacks to protest. “That the display evokes so much fury and disgust among whites, from the president on down, confirms what was evident 50 years ago,” writes Steve Chapman for the Chicago Tribune. “The problem is not *how* blacks raise their complaints about American society; it’s *that* they raise them.”⁸⁵

Figure A⁸⁶



Perhaps not surprisingly, these protests have cost Kaepernick dearly. Not only was he released from the 49ers, but he has also been unable to find a team willing to sign him despite numerous players—including Tom Brady, Richard Sherman, and Aaron

⁸⁴ Smith, Samantha. “Large Majorities See Checks and Balances, Right to Protest as Essential for Democracy.” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2 Mar. 2017. www.people-press.org/2017/03/02/large-majorities-see-checks-and-balances-right-to-protest-as-essential-for-democracy/.

⁸⁵ Chapman, Steve. “Why Do Whites Oppose the NFL Protests?” Chicagotribune.com, 26 Sept. 2017. www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chapman/ct-perspec-whites-nfl-anthem-protests-20170927-story.html.

⁸⁶ Casteel

Rodgers—saying Kaepernick deserves to be on an NFL roster.⁸⁷ “There are lesser-talented guys who are employed because they didn’t stand up for a cause,” Sherman told The Players’ Tribune.⁸⁸ Publicly, the same coaches and owners who linked arms in unity with their players claim that Kaepernick is not good enough anymore, but privately cite the controversy surrounding him as the predominant reason for his unemployment. “I wouldn’t touch the guy,” one NFL executive told reporter Ebenezer Samuel, asking to remain anonymous. “(He) still has some in the tank, but (is) not worth bringing him into your building...too much of a distraction and also not what you want in the locker room.”⁸⁹ Others fear the backlash from fans if they signed him or from the President himself, a vocal opponent to Kaepernick and all that he kneels for. According to one AFC general manager, however, the main reason he has yet to be signed is because NFL coaches and owners “genuinely hate him and can’t stand what he did. They want nothing to do with him. They think showing no interest is a form of punishment.”⁹⁰ Kaepernick has even started a lawsuit against league owners claiming they “blackballed” him, or illegally conspired to keep him from playing.⁹¹ The issue is further complicated by the

⁸⁷ Conway, Tyler. “Colin Kaepernick Says He Will Stand for National Anthem If He Plays in NFL Again.” Bleacher Report, Bleacher Report, 8 Oct. 2017., bleacherreport.com/articles/2737554-colin-kaepernick-says-he-will-stand-for-national-anthem-if-he-plays-in-nfl-again.

⁸⁸ Hill, Angela. “Richard Sherman: ‘Crazy Talk’ That NFL Teams Can’t Use Kaepernick.” The Mercury News, The Mercury News, 14 Sept. 2017. www.mercurynews.com/2017/09/14/richard-sherman-crazy-talk-that-nfl-teams-cant-use-kaepernick/.

⁸⁹ Fucillo, David. “NFL Exec on Colin Kaepernick: ‘Still Has Some in the Tank, but Not Worth Bringing Him into Your Building.’” Niners Nation, Niners Nation, 5 Jan. 2017. www.ninersnation.com/2017/1/5/14157538/colin-kaepernick-nfl-executive-black-ball-quarterbacks-national-anthem-protest.

⁹⁰ Lutz, Tom. “Colin Kaepernick to File Lawsuit against NFL Owners over Collusion.” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 15 Oct. 2017. www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/oct/15/colin-kaepernick-lawsuit-nfl-reports.

⁹¹ Belson, Ken. “Among N.F.L. Coaches, a Lack of Diversity Trickles Up.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 20 Jan. 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/sports/football/among-nfl-coaches-a-lack-of-diversity-trickles-up.html.

lack of white leadership within the NFL. None of the 32 team owners are black and the lack of black representation in leadership positions has become a prominent issue, though its impact on the protests or Kaepernick's career are yet unstudied.⁹² Nevertheless, having a majority white leadership that does not understand the struggles of the black community certainly does not help.

Though Kaepernick has certainly lost much and has been widely criticized, he has also received much praise for his courage and has become a symbol of inspiration for other athletes, both professional and amateur. Multiple other NFL players have joined in, as well as members of the WNBA's Indiana Fever and Phoenix Mercury.⁹³ High school football players are holding silent protests, college cheerleaders are taking a knee, even band members are walking out during the national anthem.⁹⁴ The torch that Kaepernick lit has been picked up by other NFL players like Seattle Seahawk stars Michael Bennett and Marshawn Lynch, and Philadelphia Eagles safety Michael Jenkins. "This is us, as concerned citizens, trying to play our role in a bigger conversation about race in America, a bigger conversation about our criminal justice system, and our law enforcement," said Jenkins.⁹⁵ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, one of the greatest basketball players of all time and one of the few who supported Muhammad Ali, wrote an article for the *Washington Post*

⁹² Roll, Nick. "Taking a Knee on Campus." Inside Higher Ed, 27 Sept. 2017. www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/27/inspired-kaepernick-and-nfl-professors-and-students-protest-field.

⁹³ Strickland, Patrick. "'Take a Knee' Anti-Racist Protests Move beyond the NFL." Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 20 Oct. 2017. www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/knee-anti-racist-protests-move-nfl-171019153538456.html.

⁹⁴ Tatum, Sophie. "Athletes, Activists Spar on Kneeling National Anthem Protests." CNN, Cable News Network, 28 Sept. 2017. www.cnn.com/2017/09/27/politics/cnn-nfl-kneeling-protests-town-hall-ac360/index.html.

⁹⁵ Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem. "Abdul-Jabbar: Insulting Colin Kaepernick Says More about Our Patriotism than His." The Washington Post, WP Company, 30 Aug. 2016. www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/08/30/insulting-colin-kaepernick-says-more-about-our-patriotism-than-his/?utm_term=.6e28f739ea07.

in which he criticized Kaepernick's opponents and emphasized the need to have this discussion:

What should horrify Americans is not Kaepernick's choice to remain seated during the national anthem, but that nearly 50 years after Ali was banned from boxing for his stance and Tommie Smith and John Carlos' raised fists caused public ostracization and numerous death threats, we still need to call attention to the same racial inequities. Failure to fix this problem is what's really un-American here.⁹⁶

Though unfortunate that society has not yet progressed past the issues, Kaepernick's protest has at least revived the discussion. While racial slurs have been stigmatized, implicit bias and stereotypes are still major issues within society as well as sports media, which does much to perpetuate them across its audiences. "Issues around media representations are fundamentally about power and status in society," write Boyle et al. "A community's or individual's ability to feel themselves represented accurately in media discourse is in part related to assumptions about the power of the media to shape and change public opinion."⁹⁷

Kaepernick challenging societal discourse has, at least, inspired others to challenge the discourse within the media. One notable tool that has been instrumental in supporting this is social media, which provides a space for athletes like Kaepernick to speak on issues he cares about and to connect with supporters. Although Kaepernick tends to be reticent with traditional media—he's only held three interviews since he started kneeling—Twitter has afforded him the opportunity to express his beliefs and

⁹⁶ Bieler, Des. "LeBron James, Steph Curry Say They Will Stand for the National Anthem." The Washington Post, WP Company, 26 Sept. 2016. www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/09/26/lebron-james-steph-curry-say-they-will-stand-for-the-national-anthem/?utm_term=.5af6ee8388be.

⁹⁷ Boyle et al., P.108

interact with those who support his cause while also bypassing mainstream media and eliminating potentially unsympathetic third-party mediators from “spinning” his comments.⁹⁸ A look at Kaepernick’s Twitter today reveals how he utilizes the medium primarily as a base of support for his cause. Rather than posting himself, he prefers instead to retweet others praising him for standing up for his beliefs, creating a collage of videos, pictures, and posts expressing support. This community is further expanded by the hashtags #TakeAKnee and #ImWithKap, which enable users to digitally join the movement and connect them to other individuals and organizations committed to the same cause. This includes other players and people of influence, who can use the medium to speak up in support of Kaepernick when they might otherwise not have a chance, or might not want to, with traditional media. “Me standing for the national anthem is something I will do...But that doesn’t mean I don’t respect and don’t agree with what Colin Kaepernick is doing,” tweeted NBA superstar LeBron James.⁹⁹ The world of social media has provided them a personal space of expression where they can be concerned citizens rather than just athletes.

This approach contrasts sharply with that of President Trump’s, who uses his account as a bully pulpit to divide others.¹⁰⁰ It points to the multitude of ways in which social media can be employed for a particular purpose and the various degrees to which people use it. For some, it is a tool to challenge dominant mainstream media and culture,

⁹⁸ Colin Kaepernick Verified Account. “Colin Kaepernick (@Kaepernick7).” Twitter.

⁹⁹ Moore

¹⁰⁰ Estepa, Jessica. “Trump's Bully Pulpit: Twitter Insults Spark Outrage, Accusations of Misogyny.” USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 29 June 2017.

www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/06/29/donald-trumps-morning-joe-insults-spark-outrage-accusations-misogyny/439876001/.

while for others it is a reflection of it. Just as it brings together those who advocate for the protest and show their support, so too does it allow opponents to voice their criticisms.

While many take to social media to support and criticize him, it nevertheless features an opportunity to expand his message and gain support from a broader audience. For every person that criticizes him, there is someone defending him.

Kaepernick has sacrificed much over the past year in pursuit of his beliefs, so to question the impact is to question whether it was all worth it. He has been criticized, condemned, vilified, insulted and even fired. The backlash from his protests have revealed just how divided our nation is over the issue of race. But despite the retaliation that he has received, the protests have been incredible effective in accomplishing their goal: raising awareness of racial inequality. More and more people are asking why he is being vilified for practicing his constitutional rights to protest and free speech.¹⁰¹

Additionally, of those surveyed by the Pew Research Center on whether racism is a problem in America, 58% (a majority) agreed that it is, which is up from 28% in 2011.¹⁰²

While more people may not be out directly protesting the inequality, this and social media show at least an increase in participation in the discussion and understanding the issue rather than being oblivious to it. As Zirin puts it, “we white folks are trapped in a history we don’t understand...unity does not heal; truth does. If we’re after truth and justice, then knowing our history might be a good place to start.”¹⁰³ Although many are still grappling with this understanding, at least there are those trying to help grow awareness of the problems which construct and inform society.

¹⁰¹ Moore.

¹⁰² Casteel.

¹⁰³ Zirin.

Chapter IV: Aesthetics over Athletics—Gender Bias in Sports Media

Sports is widely recognized as one of the few remaining bastions of the “old boys’ club” that continues to disadvantage women’s professional leagues and female athletes, as advances made in gender parity in the past half-century have not necessarily been replicated in sport.¹⁰⁴ While female athletes have become more vocal in speaking out against gender discrimination in sports and sports media, inequality within the male-dominated culture has changed very little despite this—challenged, but unchanged. Women continue to struggle to become athletes, coaches, administrators, and even journalists, and those who are successful must always be fighting for legitimacy and recognition in their jobs. Nowhere is this disparity between the two genders more obvious than in sports media, which employs oppressive tactics such as the neglect and over-sexualization in its portrayal of female athletes, a practice which reinforces hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, while conversations have become less overtly biased, there remains a discrepancy between how women are portrayed versus men, even down to the words used to describe them and expressions of emotion. Challenging the media, then, and the people within the newsroom, is one of the first steps in redressing the power imbalance. To show how these limitations have been confronted, I focus on Billie Jean King and emphasize her ground-breaking achievements in advancing women’s equality in sports. As a champion of the movement, she altered the way that society perceives female athletes, and her influence within both sports and society continue to inspire

¹⁰⁴ Thomas, Louisa. “Equal Pay for Equal Play: The Case for the Women’s Soccer Team.” *The New Yorker*, *The New Yorker*, 19 June 2017. www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-case-for-equal-pay-in-womens-sports..

contemporary female athletes to use their own standings to fight for equality, as with the U.S. Women's Soccer Team. Although the media, like society, outwardly appear to endorse these athletes in their movement for equality, it does not translate to how they represent them on the media.

By its very nature, the sports world is a sphere that allows for the display and negotiation of gender politics.¹⁰⁵ The differentiation of the physical abilities of men and women both constructs and sustains gender stereotypes: a man can jump higher, run faster, hit harder than a woman can. The celebration of traditionally masculine traits such as violence and aggression only adds to this perception of male superiority and rewards those who embody it, to further marginalize female athletes. Women athletes who are seen as overly-masculine through their powerful bodies or aggressive tactics are thus labeled as "butch" or lesbian, indicating that they are somehow other than a real woman, an idea which I discuss more in the chapter on homophobia. As such, because of the popularity of sport, these images have become the foundation and reflection of how society compares men to women, communicating and constructing stereotypes that persist outside of sports.

This discrimination is not new but rather a reflection of the female struggle of exclusion within sports throughout history. A study by Richard C. Bell informs us that up until the beginning of the 20th Century, and even for some time past then, female athleticism was limited to noncompetitive, informal gatherings that emphasized physical activity over competition as sports were believed to be a detriment to both a woman's

¹⁰⁵ Boyle, Raymond, and Richard Haynes. *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010. P. 124

health and her character. As more women began to participate, however, they began to establish athletic clubs and organized competitions, all the while facing an increasingly hostile society that found their athletic endeavors improper and their “daintier” bodies “unsuitable” for sports.^{106, 107} This opposition stunted the women’s sports movement until the passage of Title IX in 1972, in which the government mandated that any program receiving Federal funding could not discriminate based on gender—including college sports. All state universities were forced to radically transform their female athletic departments, granting them more money and access to facilities, resulting in a massive growth in participation in women’s sports across the country.¹⁰⁸ Around the same time, King was celebrating her victory over Bobby Briggs’ and becoming known as the figurehead for the equality movement in sports.

According to the Women’s Sports Foundation, just one in 32 girls played a high school varsity sports before the legislation was enacted; today, it is two out of five. In collegiate programs, the number has grown by over 600 percent.¹⁰⁹ But even though it has become more commonplace for girls to play sports, they nevertheless continue to face much of the same, if more subtle, discrimination that they did when women’s sports were not as popular. Strident sexism throughout the industry and the (minimally) attendant media coverage have undermined female successes as athletes, frustrated the goal of equality, and preserved gender stereotypes. These obstacles reflect the broader issues of

¹⁰⁶ Bell, Dave C. “A History of Women in Sport Prior to Title IX.” *The Sport Journal*, 14 Mar. 2008. thesportjournal.org/article/a-history-of-women-in-sport-prior-to-title-ix/.

¹⁰⁷ BBC. “WW1: Why Was Women's Football Banned in 1921?” *BBC News*, BBC, 12 Dec. 2014. www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30329606.

¹⁰⁸ Bell

¹⁰⁹ Carver, Anne Marie. “Press Release: June 23, 2011.” *Women's Sports Foundation*, 23 June 2011. www.womenssportsfoundation.org/media-center/press-releases/press-release-june-23-2011/.

power dynamics in society, where women continue to face injustices at the hand of the hegemonic masculinity.¹¹⁰

Sports media remains the most powerful perpetrator of this disparity. Their depictions of athleticism thus function as representations of gender identities that ultimately serve to construct and reproduce gender norms, especially when the images presented on television are predominantly male.¹¹¹ This is not a conscious yet subverted attempt by the media to preserve the patriarchy, but more a lack of responsibility on their part; media define how people see certain athletes and events, a power that can shape opinions and reinforce stereotypes whether intentionally or no. By constantly showing the athletic achievements of male athletes while neglecting those of women, the media allows for the perpetuation of male dominance.

The glaring disparity in the quantity and quality of coverage of female athletes was recently scrutinized by a team from the University of Southern California (U.S.C.), who surveyed L.A. broadcast affiliates and ESPN's "SportsCenter" to see what percentage of airtime these channels spent covering women compared to men, and the results are striking: in 2014, network affiliates devoted 3.2% of airtime on women, while "SportsCenter" devoted only 2%.¹¹² While these percentages are shockingly low for a group that comprises 40% of all sports participants, it is made all the more so in knowing that this number has actually decreased from 5% in 1989 when the study was originally conducted. Although women's sports have achieved some successes in the intervening

¹¹⁰ Boyle et al., 136.

¹¹¹ Shifflett, Bethany, et al. "Gender Bias in Sports-Media Analytics." *Journal of Sports Media*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2016, P. 114

¹¹² Cooky, Cheryl, et al. "'It's Dude Time!': A Quarter Century of Excluding Women's Sports in Televised News and Highlight Shows." *Communication & Sport*, vol. 3, no. 3, May 2015, pp. 261-287.

years, such as the eradication of overt sexism or live broadcasts of WNBA games, on the whole the movement appears to be losing ground, at least statistically. This deepening silence reveals both that the male-run sports media does not value women's sports and that they presume audiences do not either. These attitudes create a Catch-22, in which few women's sports are featured because there is so little demand, yet there is little demand because there is so little coverage.¹¹³ It is a vicious cycle that continuously marginalizes women and diminishes their accomplishments.

When women's sports are discussed in the media, the language used by sportscasters to comment on these athletes reflect orthodox stereotypes of women that uphold them as marginalized members of society. A team at Cambridge University analyzed the vocabulary used by the media when talking about women in sports and found a great disparity between the words to describe men versus women. Men, it found, were more likely to be associated with adjectives like 'fastest,' 'strong,' 'big,' and 'gutsy,' while women were 'fatigued,' 'older,' 'choking,' or—even worse—'married.'¹¹⁴ In general, words communicating strength were more frequently used with men while women were associated with words connoting weakness, just as women were more likely to be infantilized by being referred to as 'girls,' while men were rarely called 'boys.'¹¹⁵ The study also found that women are more likely to be referenced by their first names while men are identified by their last names: it is Serena [Williams] and [Roger] Federer. According to the linguists, it is common for dominant social groups to call each

¹¹³ Thomas

¹¹⁴ "Aesthetics or Athletics?" Cambridge University Press, 1 Aug. 2016. www.cambridge.org/about-us/media/press-releases/aesthetics-or-athletics/.

¹¹⁵ Duncan, Margaret Carlisle. "Gender Bias in Televised Sports." FAIR, Jan. 1992. fair.org/extra/gender-bias-in-televised-sports/.

other by their last names and refer to everyone else by their first names.¹¹⁶ Just by listening to sports programs, then, are we ingesting these demeaning adjectives and hierarchal naming structures that are impressing the notion of the subservient female.

This dichotomy of expression extends to the manner in which sportscasters cover male and female stories. While observing local channels and ESPN for their study, the U.S.C. researchers noticed that men's sports were "presented with far more enthusiasm and excitement, the commentators consistently deploying vocal inflections, high-volume excitement, and evocative descriptors."¹¹⁷ This energy was counterpoised with dull, lackluster, matter-of-fact presentations of women's sports, which sends the message to audiences that women's achievements are less exciting and less important than men's.¹¹⁸ Hair, make-up, and body shape are also discussed about women in a way that is rarely, if ever, done for men, as if a woman's sexuality or appearance in some way qualifies her as an athlete.¹¹⁹ "Language around women in sports focuses disproportionately on the appearance, clothes and personal lives of women, highlighting a greater emphasis on aesthetics over athletics," writes the Cambridge University Press. "Research suggests we will be discussing the length of Heather Watson's skirt, rather than her chances of winning."¹²⁰ This objectification shifts attention from their skills to their looks, as if their athletic achievements are not enough, and caters specifically to the perceived interests of

¹¹⁶ Cambridge University Press.

¹¹⁷ Cooky et al., P.274

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 264.

¹¹⁹ Boyle et al., P.128

¹²⁰ Cambridge University Press.

a majority male audience in the hopes of increasing viewership (despite evidence to the contrary).¹²¹

The U.S.C. study adds that the “conservative gender ideologies, structured inequities, and sex segregation continue to limit girls’ challenge to boys’ hegemony,” emphasizing the difficulty in overcoming these injustices.¹²² But this disparity does not mean that women have been sitting on the sidelines in passive observance; some, like King, have made the most of their media attention to address the sports community and promote their causes. King’s 1973 “Battle of the Sexes” match against Bobby Riggs was groundbreaking in shifting perceptions towards women’s sports. “She has prominently affected the way 50 percent of society thinks and feels about itself in the vast area of physical exercise,” Frank Deford wrote in *Sports Illustrated* after the match. “Moreover, like (Arnold) Palmer, she has made a whole sports boom because of the singular force of her presence.”¹²³ But if anyone was going to be the “lighting rod” for female equality, it was going to be King. When Riggs approached her about the match, King was at the peak of her career: at age 29, she had already won 10 Grand Slam titles and was ranked No. 1 in the world, while Riggs, a star during the early 40s, was 55. A self-proclaimed chauvinist, Riggs believed that the women’s game was so inferior to men’s that even an old, out of shape male like himself could easily beat them as he had done to Margaret Court just a few months before. In addition to damaging her reputation, a loss would maim the women’s tour and women’s tennis association she had just started, as well as

¹²¹ Shifflett et al., P.124

¹²² Cooky et al., P.279

¹²³ Schwartz, Larry. “Billie Jean Won for All Women.” *ESPN Sports Century*, ESPN. www.espn.com/sportscency/features/00016060.html.

undermine the Title IX legislation she had lobbied for that went into effect a year before.¹²⁴ The women's movement, it seemed, was inextricably linked to the outcome of the match. "I thought it would set us back 50 years if I didn't win," said King. "It would ruin the women's tour and affect all women's self-esteem."¹²⁵

The media fanfare pitting the "Male Chauvinist Pig vs. Hairy-Legged Feminist" attracted a record-number of attendees to the match and became the most-watched tennis match in history, with an estimated 90 million people tuned in around the world (50 million in the U.S. alone).¹²⁶ Riggs entered the court wearing a "Sugar Daddy" tracksuit in a rickshaw driven by his "bosom buddy" models, while King emulated Cleopatra atop a throne carried by four bare-chested men. Despite the age difference between the competitors, the large audience reveals how many thought the game would be much closer than it was, with King easily dominating Riggs 6-4, 6-3, 6-3.¹²⁷

King's victory was significant in achieving greater recognition not just for women's tennis, but for all of women's sports, making a statement that women's sports deserved equal respect to men's. "It was about social change," King said. "Boys and girls have grown up seeing the world through men's eyes. I was playing against a man and all of the sudden every media was interested because it was about them." The mixed-gender nature of the match boosted its popularity, promising to either challenge or uphold preconceived notions about women and sports; King's failure would only have been a

¹²⁴ Cochrane, Kira. "Billie Jean King: 'It's Not about the Money. It's about the Equality Message'." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 23 June 2013. www.theguardian.com/sport/2013/jun/23/billie-jean-king-equality-message.

¹²⁵ Schwartz

¹²⁶ Bucklew, Gracie. "Battle of the Sexes: 'Male Chauvinist Pig versus Hairy-Legged Feminist.'" South Seattle Emerald, 17 Oct. 2017. southseattleemerald.com/2017/10/17/battle-of-the-sexes-male-chauvinist-pig-versus-hairy-legged-feminist/.

¹²⁷ Schwartz

confirmation of these stereotypes. Her success, however, caused audiences to reconsider the stereotype of the female athlete while bestowing King with greater celebrity that she used to promote women's equality both in tennis and beyond. By the end of her career, she had won 39 grand slam titles in singles, doubles, and mixed doubles, and founded the Women's Tennis Association and the Women's Sports Foundation, earning her the title of "100 Most Important Americans of the 20th Century" by Life Magazine, the only female athlete to make the list.¹²⁸ Martina Navratilova, another tennis star to join the movement, said, "She was a crusader fighting a battle for all of us. She was carrying the flag; it was all right to be a jock." The same year as the "Battle of the Sexes," the U.S. Open became the first major tournament to offer equal prize money for men and women after King threatened to not play, just one example of her using her celebrity to promote her cause. With all the Grand Slam tournaments now offering equal pay, tennis has been cited as a leader in gender-equality that sets a standard that other sports can and should aspire to.

King's social activism efforts continues to inspire other female athletes to take their own stands in fighting for the same rights other women throughout society are fighting for. Contemporary female athletes like tennis' Venus Williams and soccer's Megan Rapinoe are continuing King's efforts by standing up to traditionally male-dominated institutions and demanding equal pay, the most conspicuous discrepancy between male and female athletes. Following King's example, Williams pressured the Wimbledon All England Club, the last major tournament that had not done so already, to

¹²⁸ Schwartz.

award female tennis players the same payouts as their male counterparts.¹²⁹ Similar steps are being taken in other sports, but change is slow and these demands are often met with much protest. The three-time World Cup, four-time Olympic gold medal winning U.S. Women's Soccer Team recently filed a wage discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, protesting that players could get paid up to 40% less than the men's team.¹³⁰ "Honestly, I feel like we are a walking protest," said Rapinoe. "The fact that we're women professional athletes says that in and of itself. We've been feeling the inequality; we've been struggling with sexism in sports."¹³¹ At the heart of the issue lies the media: the heads of the U.S. soccer organization argue that men's games average four times larger TV audiences than women's. With men generating more revenue, they should get paid more.¹³² The women counter this by pointing out that even though they do not attract as many audiences, they are still performing the same job, with the same demands, as the men and a lot more successful than them. It is clear, then, that the sports media's lack of attention to female athletes, even talented ones, is having obvious, quantifiable effects on the sportstars themselves.

One only needs to examine the newsroom, as society's central purveyor of information, and its media personnel to better understand the whence this disparity in

¹²⁹ The Reliable Source. "How Venus Williams Got Equal Pay for Women at Wimbledon." The Washington Post, WP Company, 2 July 2013. www.washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2013/07/02/how-venus-williams-got-equal-pay-for-women-at-wimbledon/?utm_term=.fa9818ef08a7.

¹³⁰ O'Donnell, Norah. "Team USA Members on Historic Fight for Equal Pay in Women's Soccer." CBS News, CBS Interactive, 21 Nov. 2016. www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-women-soccer-team-usa-gender-discrimination-equal-pay/.

¹³¹ Moore, Greg. "Moore: U.S. Soccer Star Megan Rapinoe Says Female Athletes Are 'Walking Protest'." Azcentral, 24 Oct. 2017. www.azcentral.com/story/sports/soccer/2017/10/24/moore-us-soccer-megan-rapinoe-womens-pro-athletes-protest/797253001/.

¹³² O'Donnell

representation arises. According to the American Society of News Editors, women comprised only 37.7% of traditional newsrooms in 2017, the same as it was in 1999.¹³³ sports media, however, has always been considered to be a “male preserve, covered by men, talking to a male audience.”¹³⁴ Within this male dominated sub-genre, women make us as few as 14.4% of journalists and are overwhelmingly sidelined as ancillary reporters, the U.S.C. study found.¹³⁵ Another study by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in sports found that while there had been a small increase in female sports journalists over the years, nevertheless white men comprise 90% of all sports media.¹³⁶ With so little female input, these men gush over their favorite male athletes while ignoring equal or ever greater female accomplishments.¹³⁷ The men claim this is because “nobody is interested,” but the reality is that they are the ones who are not interested, thus engineering the vicious cycle of demand and coverage. Featuring women more prominently within print and broadcast media expands perspectives and gives way to a different type of commentary, one that offers a more egalitarian female representation.

With the rise of the Internet, however, websites are tapping into the neglected audience by prioritizing female sports, creating online spaces that thrive where mainstream media fails. The rise in independent blogs like “For the Love of the Game” and sites such as ESPNw, which both focus exclusively on women’s sports, highlight a

¹³³ Abbady, Tal. “The Modern Newsroom Is Stuck Behind The Gender And Color Line.” NPR, NPR, 1 May 2017. www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/05/01/492982066/the-modern-newsroom-is-stuck-behind-the-gender-and-color-line.

¹³⁴ Boyle et al., P.134

¹³⁵ Cooky et al., P.278

¹³⁶ Morrison, Sara.

¹³⁷ Kane, Mary Jo. “Progress and Inequality: Women's Sports and the Gender Gap.” CEHD Vision 2020, University of Minnesota, 26 Jan. 2017. cehdvision2020.umn.edu/blog/progress-inequality-womens-sports-gender-gap/.

growing trend in acknowledging women's sports and their popularity within society. The multitude of perspectives and experiences that the Internet offers has the ability to present more focused, less biased news that diverges from and challenges traditional media's representations, at least in theory. ESPNw, a subsidiary of the sports media powerhouse, features articles on female athletes around the country in a variety of different sports, including player spotlights and general sports news. On the other hand, "sports" is just one of four sections of the website, the other being "voices," "life/style," and "culture." The top stories presented on the homepage when I first accessed the site were "College Football Bachelorette" and "BFF Goals: Serena and Meghan Markle." Though marketed as a site for women's sports, the domain is built more as a lifestyle website specifically for women who might also be interested in women's sports. The representations of powerful women thus remain unseen by the very people who need them most—the people who continue to doubt their equality. So although sites such as these present progress on some level, its limitations remind us that hegemonic masculinity is still evident in online media as well.¹³⁸

The unique abilities of social media, however, has been more effective in providing in-depth reflections of female athletes that extend beyond, even challenge, their representations in mainstream media by allowing them the opportunity to present themselves directly to their fans and bring public support to their causes. Rapinoe and her teammates use their well-followed social media accounts to spread awareness among the soccer community and greater public, which further pressures the U.S. Soccer

¹³⁸ Shifflett et al., P.115

organization to make a change.¹³⁹ Just as other athletes have taken to Twitter to voice their opinions, these women are utilizing the new medium to take the fight for justice directly to the public, surpassing the biased reporting of mainstream media.

The most important role of social media, however, has been its ability to inspire sports fans to use these spaces as opportunities to point out traditional sports media's covert, sexist undertones. Audiences can notice something on a sports broadcast and within seconds have a post condemning the comments on their public social media account. This public activism was especially prominent during the Rio Olympics, the only time when female sports benefit from a slight, and temporary, increase in coverage. When NBC reporter Dan Hicks accredited a female swimmer's medal-winning performance to her male husband-coach, incensed audiences took to Twitter to roast his misogynistic words. "'There's the man responsible for turning his wife into an entirely new swimmer...' REALLY, NBC?" tweeted @TheWilderThings.¹⁴⁰ The same happened when the Daily Mail published an article describing Katie Ledecky as the "Female Michael Phelps" after she broke her own world record, inciting immediate backlash that spurred the newspaper to remove the offensive comparison.¹⁴¹ Whereas previously these comments might have gone unreported, nowadays regular citizens can point out flaws and spread awareness of sexist coverage to their social communities.

¹³⁹ Das, Andrew. "U.S. Women's Soccer Players Renew Their Fight for Equal Pay." The New York Times, The New York Times, 7 July 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/sports/soccer/us-womens-soccer-players-renew-their-fight-for-equal-pay.html.

¹⁴⁰ Landsbaum, Claire. "The Media's Olympics Coverage Reminds Us Just How Taxing It Is to Be a Female Athlete." The Cut, 8 Aug. 2016. www.thecut.com/2016/08/female-athletes-at-the-olympics-face-sexism.html.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Although male sportscasters might not be aware of their disparaging language when covering female athletes, their ignorant depictions perpetuate a masculine ideal that further distances the goal of gender parity. “The media needs to be more careful,” said Olympic gold-medalist rower Anna Watkins. “They define how the public see you. I think often it's an unintentional thing, but in some ways that's more concerning as it shows an unconscious bias.”¹⁴² The overwhelmingly male journalists control how we as a society define and value athleticism, currently using their influences to reinforce orthodox perceptions of masculinity and their dominance in society. The first step to enacting change, however, is by spreading awareness. The sports world is already in the midst of a major transition, as more athletes are willing to speak up in the fight for gender equality and audiences becomes less tolerable to sexist media coverage. Already, the market for female sports is growing: “Women’s tennis television ratings are often better than men’s, the United States women’s soccer team got the highest ratings in American soccer history in 2015, and the W.N.B.A. finals notched their highest ratings [in 2016],” writes New York Times reporter Will Leitch. “Women’s sports are more popular than they have ever been, and that growth continues exponentially.”

These transformations are already making waves in the media industry and breaking down stereotypical representations of the sexes. While female athletes are still judged by their looks, Alex Morgan’s nude cover on Vogue Magazine emphasized not the soccer star’s slender figure but her “massive, muscular quads.”¹⁴³ Meanwhile ESPN,

¹⁴² Bates, Claire. “Is Some Olympic Commentary Sexist?” BBC News, BBC, 11 Aug. 2016. www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37037050.

¹⁴³ Thomas, Louisa. “Equal Pay for Equal Play: The Case for the Women's Soccer Team.” The New Yorker, The New Yorker, 19 June 2017. www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-case-for-equal-pay-in-womens-sports.

the biggest name in sports media, has made a concerted effort to promote gender equality by showing more female sports and featuring more female broadcasters and analysts.¹⁴⁴ Sports media has the ability to offer a space to amplify woman's voices and successes, where every kick, punch, and hurdle breaks down stereotypes and challenges male superiority. It has the power to "generate real social, economic and environmental change and contribute to sustainable development, social cohesion and even to challenge mind sets and prejudice," as found by the United Nations organization UN Women.¹⁴⁵ Although much progress still needs to be made, perceptions are changing bit by bit as both the sports world and the media industry become more responsive the newfound social dynamics of the 21st century.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas.

¹⁴⁵ Puri, Lakshmi. "Sport Has Huge Potential to Empower Women and Girls." UN Women, 16 Feb. 2016. www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/2/lakshmi-puri-speech-at-value-of-hosting-mega-sport-event.

Chapter V: Heterosexual Heroes and the Macho Mindset—Homophobia in Sports and Sports Media

The sports culture celebrates athletes who play into stereotypical representations of masculinity, like strength and aggression, while sidelining those who do not. This endorsement of a particular ideal of masculinity affects how sports media represents and how society views not only female but also homosexual athletes. Just as women are believed to be athletically inferior to their male counterparts, so this traditional notion of masculinity that sports promotes marks gay athletes as weak and effeminate, encouraging both misogynistic and homophobic attitudes. But as society has grown more accepting of sexual minorities, so too has sports. The first active player of any of the major U.S. sports (football, basketball, baseball, hockey) to announce his homosexuality, NBA player Jason Collins received widespread support and has become an example and an inspiration for other gay athletes. Unimaginable even 20 years ago, this positive reaction is indicative of the wider societal shift into a culture that is more accepting of sexual minorities and the LGBTQ community. Indeed, of the three groups of minorities that I cover, contemporary coming out of gay male athletes have received the most positive media coverage, especially when compared to previous efforts by Billie Jean King and MLB player Glenn Burke, or even by current WNBA player Brittney Griner. However, despite showering praise on Collins and denouncing those that did not, sports media continues to endorse a heterosexual norm by practicing a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach that continues to exclude gay athletes and gay issues from media coverage.

Sports and its attendant media coverage are two of the primary cultural institutions that perpetuate a specific idea of masculinity within society, as discussed in the last chapter.¹⁴⁶ Sports media's focus on men's sports, especially "macho" sports like football and hockey, promotes images of hyper-physical athletes that establish and define gender stereotypes, emphasizing a specific type of masculinity that is portrayed as superior to others.¹⁴⁷ Athletes, then, are marketed as embodiments of the ideal man, an ideal that by definition is strictly separated from the "weaker" conditions of femininity and queerness. Male athletes who exemplify these hyper-masculine traits are then idolized by the media and enriched with social capital, while those that do not are minimized.

In order to better understand present attitudes and how far society has progressed, we must first look into how homosexuality used to be considered a crutch in sports. In researching this societal shift, Lori Dann and Tracey Everbach found that "gayness" used to be emphasized as the antithesis of masculinity, athleticism, and power. They focused on a telling example by Major League Baseball player Bill Beane, who remembers in his autobiography the first time his coach yelled "Don't run like a faggot, boy!" on the athletic field. "It equaled weakness and timidity, everything a budding, insecure jock wanted to avoid," he wrote. Beane notes that his coach also regularly called his players words like "queer," "girl," or "sissy," impressing the idea on these young boys that sports

¹⁴⁶ Kian, Edward M, et al. "Sport Journalists' Views on Gay Men in Sport, Society and within Sport Media." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 50, no. 8, Feb. 2013, P.899

¹⁴⁷ Kian, Edward M, et al. "'I Am Happy to Start the Conversation': Examining Sport Media Framing of Jason Collins' Coming out and Playing in the NBA." *Sexualities*, vol. 18, no. 5-6, 2015, P.620

were for real men only and feminine weaknesses would not be tolerated.¹⁴⁸ To avoid being labeled as such, male athletes were taught to prove their manhood, even at a young age, by increasing their intensity, being hyper aggressive, and inflicting pain on others. While attitudes have evolved somewhat since then, the media continues to reflect parts of this world by focusing coverage on more traditionally masculine sports like football and boxing, celebrating these types of athleticism while ignoring more graceful sports (i.e. effeminate) such as figure skating or diving.¹⁴⁹ As the gatekeepers of the media, the overwhelmingly heterosexual, male newsrooms breed a culture of hegemonic masculinity that is reflected in their broadcasts that, overwhelmingly, feature straight male athletes in masculine team sports.¹⁵⁰

Contemporary acceptance of the LGBTQ community has, to various degrees, also transferred to the sports world. The General Social Survey found that acceptance has rapidly increased across all demographics but most especially from youths, with 81% of Americans 18-29 expressing support for gay marriage.¹⁵¹ Entertainment media has done much to promote this change by using their platform to promote positive gay characters and defy normal stereotypes in TV, music, and movies. Celebrities, who often risked their careers by coming out, face much less backlash nowadays from more accepting audiences.¹⁵² Matters are improving for gay athletes, too, though at a slower pace. The decrease in cultural homophobia is changing the relationship between gay men and sports

¹⁴⁸ Dann, Lori, and Tracy Everbach. "Opening the Sports Closet: Media Coverage of the Self-Outings of Jason Collins and Brittney Griner." *Journal of Sports Media*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016. P.171

¹⁴⁹ Kian et. al. (2015), P.627

¹⁵⁰ Kian et. al. (2013), P.899

¹⁵¹ Kian et. al. (2015), P.618

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 622

that diverges from the widespread disapproval of the past. The 2016 Rio Olympics featured 56 openly gay athletes, the most of any Olympics yet.¹⁵³ Most professional athletes have expressed support for gay teammates, even within traditionally masculine fields like football or basketball. Even sports fans have become more accepting, with only 12% of respondents on a survey said they would be “less likely to support their favorite athlete if he or she came out as gay.”¹⁵⁴ “Fans are a reflection of society. Some are mean-spirited,” write Edward Kian et al. in a 2015 report examining the framing of Jason Collins’ revelation by the media. “Most are good people who have become far more accepting of homosexuality over the years, because most people now know someone personally who is gay.”¹⁵⁵ Despite the homogenous composition of the newsroom, sports media has also had a large impact in inciting this. The media, Kian et al. write, is framing more positive narratives around openly gay sports figures and promoting the sports realm as an inclusive, accepting institution for gays and are more vocal in condemning homophobia. This willingness of sports journalists to discuss homosexuality promotes the sports world as an inclusive, accepting institution for gay athletes, though heterosexuality remains the underlying norm.¹⁵⁶

Collins chose to come out in an article he wrote for the *Sports Illustrated* website on April 29, 2013. Immediately the media trumpeted him as the first ‘active’ male athlete to come out as gay in one of the four most popular U.S. professional men’s team sports leagues. As many athletes had revealed their sexuality upon retiring, Collins was deemed

¹⁵³ Outsports. “Record 56 out LGBT Athletes at Rio Olympics.” Outsports, 11 July 2016. www.outsports.com/2016/7/11/12133594/rio-olympics-teams-2016-gay-lgbt-athletes-record.

¹⁵⁴ Kian et. al. (2015), P.620

¹⁵⁵ Kian et. al. (2013), P.903

¹⁵⁶ Kian et. al. (2015), P.621

all the more brave for choosing to do so in the midst of a career that could still suffer as a result. “I’m a 34-year-old NBA center. I’m black. And I’m gay,” wrote Collins.¹⁵⁷ But Collins defies the stereotypical notion of a “gay” athlete: he played for seven teams during his thirteen-year career and twice played in the NBA finals. On the court, he was best known for his physical behavior. “I’ve always been an aggressive player, even in high school. Am I so physical to prove that being gay doesn’t make you soft?”

Collins certainly challenges the traditional image of gay athletes, but he was not the first player to come out of the closet or even the first male player. Thirty-five years before *Sports Illustrated* published the article, MLB player Glenn Burke was discussing his own homosexuality with the Dodgers’ franchise owners and baseball media—only to have the latter refuse to publish it and the former offer to pay for his honeymoon if he would marry a woman.¹⁵⁸ “It’s harder to be gay in sports than anywhere else, except maybe President,” wrote Burke in an *Inside Sports* article that was not published until after his retirement.¹⁵⁹ But society has changed quite drastically over the years, and being gay is no longer as stigmatized. Twenty years after his death in 1995 from AIDS-related causes, Burke is now promoted as “Baseball’s Gay Pioneer.”¹⁶⁰ Collins’ own smiling face on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, the most circulated magazine in the country, next to the words “The Gay Athlete” would have been unimaginable when Burke played in the

¹⁵⁷ Collins, Jason. “Why NBA Center Jason Collins Is Coming out Now.” *SI.com*, Sports Illustrated, 29 Apr. 2013. www.si.com/more-sports/2013/04/29/jason-collins-gay-nba-player.

¹⁵⁸ Kaplan, Sarah. “The Trials of Baseball’s First Openly Gay Player, Glenn Burke, Four Decades Ago.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 17 Aug. 2015. www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/08/17/the-trials-of-baseballs-first-openly-gay-player-glenn-burke-four-decades-ago/?utm_term=.fa47c756fb14.

¹⁵⁹ Branch, John. “Posthumous Recognition.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 July 2014. www.nytimes.com/2014/07/15/sports/baseball/mlb-to-recognize-glenn-burke-as-a-gay-pioneer-in-baseball.html.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

70s.¹⁶¹ “I’m glad I’m coming out in 2013 rather than 2003,” Collins writes. “The climate has shifted; public opinion has shifted. And yet we still have so much farther to go [...] The more people who speak out, the better, gay or straight.”¹⁶²

The public’s reaction to Collins’ announcement was overwhelmingly positive. Fans, fellow athletes, even celebrities took to social media to express their support and to congratulate Collins for his bravery. Past and present NBA stars such as LeBron James, Magic Johnson, Charles Barkley, and Dallas Maverick’s owner Mark Cuban all supported him on Twitter, as well as Lakers player Kobe Bryant, who had been fined \$100,000 in 2011 for using a homophobic slur against a referee. “It’s fantastic. It sets an incredible precedent,” said Bryant “I think the most important part about it [...] is that one person coming out is showing this type of courage that gives others that same type of courage.”¹⁶³ NBA Commissioner David Stern, Bill Clinton, and Ellen DeGeneres also tweeted encouragement. “So proud of you, Jason Collins! This is a huge step forward for our country. We’ve got your back! –mo” wrote then-First Lady Michelle Obama.¹⁶⁴ In fact, many sports journalists publicized quotes directly from public figures’ social media accounts.¹⁶⁵ The few who disapproved of Collins’ announcement, such as Miami Dolphins wide receiver Mike Wallace or Detroit Lions cornerback Alphonso Smith, were swiftly criticized or dismissed in media coverage.¹⁶⁶ Soon after Collins’ announcement,

¹⁶¹ Kian et. al. (2015), P.620

¹⁶² Collins

¹⁶³ Young, Royce. “Kobe Bryant on Jason Collins: 'It Sets an Incredible Precedent'.” CBSSports.com, CBS, 24 Feb. 2014. www.cbssports.com/nba/news/kobe-bryant-on-jason-collins-it-sets-an-incredible-precedent/.

¹⁶⁴ Hernandez, Brian Anthony. “Kobe Bryant, Bill Clinton Tweet Support for Jason Collins' Coming Out.” Mashable, Mashable, 29 Apr. 2013. mashable.com/2013/04/29/kobe-bryant-bill-clinton-tweet-support-as-jason-collins-comes-out-as-gay/#DSyMunbbREqw.

¹⁶⁵ Kian et. al. (2015), P.625

¹⁶⁶ Dann et. al., P.180

Sports Illustrated held a fan poll which revealed that 53% of respondents believed it to be “a positive step for pro sports,” highlighting the widespread acceptance, even encouragement, in society.¹⁶⁷

Heralded as a watershed moment in the sports world, the media’s framing of the announcement as a turning point in history is important in understanding the significance of the event for future coverage of gay athletes as well as for the overall place of homosexuality in sport.¹⁶⁸ In their 2015 study, Kian et al. found that the media often used terms such as ‘historic,’ ‘landmark,’ and ‘monumental’ when referencing Collins, hailing him as a modern-day hero not just for sports but for society as well. Coverage revealed how far sports media has come in adopting more “inclusive perspectives concerning gay men” and how far the country has come in accepting sexual minorities.¹⁶⁹ The only controversy noted in any research on the topic, from the media and public alike, consisted of a ESPN debate where sports journalist Chris Broussard equated homosexuality to sin. He was promptly condemned throughout the sports media community, with one journalist questioning why Broussard’s comments were “necessary or even relevant at this hour” and another adding “all of this feels like it’s from the 90s.”¹⁷⁰ The sport’s world’s response to Collins and those who disapprove of him have shown that the old ways of thinking about gay athletes has given way to more progressive thinking as members of the LGBTQ community move closer to being seen as equals in American society.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Dann et al, 181

¹⁶⁸ Kian et. al. (2015), P.622

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 634

¹⁷⁰ Dann et. al., P.180

¹⁷¹ Kian et. al. (2015), P.625

While both the media and the public have rallied around Collins as the first active player to come out, in doing so they negate the efforts by those who came before him and their profound influence in paving the way for Collin's own revelation. In 1981 Billie Jean King was the first prominent female athlete to reveal her sexuality after her partner outed her as gay to a much less sympathetic public, as did tennis legend Martina Navratilova only a few months later (to whom Collins credits for inspiring him to come out).¹⁷² These women are often overlooked by mainstream media due to perceptions of female athletes, which uses feminine stereotypes to suggest that women who are physically strong are in some way not real women. "Especially in women's sport, there is a presumption that athletes who play certain sports are more likely to be gay than others," responded one journalist in an anonymous survey hosted by Kian et al. in 2013.¹⁷³ Because of this assumption, female athletes are encouraged to go out of their way to emphasize their femininity by wearing mini-skirts, posing provocatively, and emphasizing their relationships (with men).¹⁷⁴ This encouragement by the media for women to conform to constructed gender identities reinforces what I discussed last chapter about how the masculine media ostracizes and disempowers female athletes and their accomplishments.¹⁷⁵

Despite having the media downplaying their stories, King and Navratilova should be recognized for their bravery for coming out at a time when no one else had done so and to a much less accepting society. King admitted that she could not have revealed

¹⁷² Dann et. al., P.176

¹⁷³ Kian et. al. (2013), P.902

¹⁷⁴ Dann et. al., P.170

¹⁷⁵ Trolan, Eoin J. "The Impact of the Media on Gender Inequality within Sport." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 91, 2013, P.221

herself as being gay during the 70s because she feared it would downplay her accomplishments on the women's tour and threaten to derail all that she had worked for. While King was outed by her partner, Navratilova, widely considered to be one of the best women's tennis players if not one of the greatest athletes of all time, was the first prominent athlete to come out on her own volition. While Collins was declared a hero, both women were immediately dropped from their endorsement deals and lost millions of dollars, as well as becoming targets for the media despite their prolific careers.¹⁷⁶

Though they sacrificed their livelihoods, these women became role models to generations of athletes after and began a movement that helped transform women's sports into an environment that is more accepting of gay athletes, especially when compared to men's. Of the 56 gay athletes at the Olympics, 44 of them were women who identified as lesbian or bi-sexual.¹⁷⁷ Brittney Griner is one of the most dominant WNBA players of the time who publicly came out two weeks before Collins, also on SI.com, but to much less fanfare. In a search conducted by Dann and Everbach (2016) that yielded 28 articles on the two following their revelations, 20 were devoted to Collins while only eight discussed Griner.¹⁷⁸ Much of the media, including the female journalist who interviewed her, treated it as a minor event, exposing the expectation of lesbianism in women's sports. Griner's acknowledgement was not much of a surprise, then, in an atmosphere that already associates strong, physical women with masculinity, whereas with Collins it was a 'first.' In her interview, Griner acknowledged that the WNBA is indeed a more

¹⁷⁶ Associated Press. "Billie Jean King Talks Coming Out." ESPN, ESPN, 6 Aug. 2013. www.espn.com/tennis/story/_/id/9545526/billie-jean-king-discusses-coming-pbs-show.

¹⁷⁷ Outsports

¹⁷⁸ Dann et. al., 176

accepting community than the NBA or any male team sports for that matter, and that in today's atmosphere it would require more courage for a man to come out as gay. While many assume the homosexuality of top female athletes, few assume the same for men. Women's leagues, at least, serve as an example of an accepting community within the world of sports where sexuality is irrelevant to their success as an athlete. "Hopefully the men can one day adopt that same attitude that we have," said Griner.¹⁷⁹

Sports and sports media institutions have certainly achieved much progress in the past 20 years when it comes to supporting gay athletes, but this progress is nevertheless limited by the persistence of a "don't ask, don't tell" approach that excludes gay representations from the media. While the overtly homophobic content of the 1980s has largely been eradicated, there remains a tradition of ignorance between athletes and sports journalists, as revealed anonymously by reporters in the survey conducted by Kian et al.¹⁸⁰ To reporters, this unspoken agreement to not ask athletes about their sexuality is a sign of respect, recognizing that an athlete's sexual preferences has no impact on their performance, yet repeatedly feature relationships of heterosexual athletes. This is exemplified by the media coverage of Michael Sam, who was inspired by Collins to announce his homosexuality before entering the NFL draft in 2014. Excited by the prospect of the first openly gay NFL player, the media obsessed over Sam and wished him the best of luck—until he was shown kissing his boyfriend after being drafted by the Saint Louis Rams.¹⁸¹ A straight male athlete kissing his girlfriend is fine, apparently, but

¹⁷⁹ Dann et. al., 182

¹⁸⁰ Kian et. al. (2013), 901

¹⁸¹ Cassidy, William P. "Inching Away from the Toy Department." *Communication & Sport*, vol. 5, no. 5, June 2016, P.548

a man kissing another man on live TV is not; society is only accepting of gay athletes as long as they do not have to see the public displays of affection between them.

By not featuring more content related to sexual minorities within sport, the media reinforces heteronormativity as the norm and symbolically annihilates homosexuality from the sports pages.¹⁸² As defined by Dann and Everbach, symbolic annihilation “posits that certain groups are absent from mass media and therefore are marginalized or trivialized in society.”¹⁸³ This is indeed the case with both female and LGBTQ athletes, despite the media’s pride of being progressive in their acceptance and support of the few gay athletes that have come out recently. The continued exclusion of gay and lesbians from mainstream coverage, as well as the frequent references to a male athlete’s heterosexual relationships, promotes the dominance of ‘conventional’ male athletes and uphold the masculine hegemony. Sports journalists thus act as the gatekeepers of the heterosexual norms and a conservative definition of masculinity. As Kian et al. note, they are “were more willing to wait for the majority of the culture to come to a place of inclusion toward sexual minorities, rather than serve as active agents in the pursuit of that change.”¹⁸⁴ While they possess the ability to deconstruct sexual stereotypes and alter the way sports and society view gay athletes, mainstream media prefers instead to wait for the culture of sports to change before they change themselves.

¹⁸² Kian et. al. (2013),. 906

¹⁸³ Dann et. al., 169

¹⁸⁴ Kian et. al. (2013),. 907

Conclusion: Post-Game

That society has progressed in the past 50 years is indisputable: the gender pay gap has decreased from 36 cents in 1980 to 17 cents, gay marriage has been legalized, the male to female ratio in NCAA participation is almost equal, and social media allows us to connect with anyone, anywhere, anytime.¹⁸⁵

The idea that we have somehow become a “postracial, postpolitical society,” however, is a fallacy, a utopian dream that bears little resemblance to contemporary society. Zirin writes that these past few years will be remembered for their rebellions, just as athletes have been more active in rebelling against societal ideals, norms, and injustices.¹⁸⁶ Athletes speaking up against racial, gender, and sexual discrimination is as much a reflection of the sports world as it is of society in general. Though admittedly sports still lags behind society in many areas, the effort that minority athletes are putting into the fight for equality make them the heroes of the sports world.

As society becomes noticeably more liberal, sports media has tentatively followed suit to both applause and criticism. Athletes engaged in social activism are now prominent points of discussion in mainstream print and broadcast media, more so than ever before. This is mainly the result of a changing culture within sports itself, one that allows and even celebrates athletes’ political involvement. Even so, the representation of these minority athletes continues to reflect and endorse a white, heterosexual male dominance: black athletes are thuggish, females are butch, and gay athletes are invisible.

¹⁸⁵ Brown, Anna, and Eileen Patten. “The Narrowing, but Persistent, Gender Gap in Pay.” Pew Research Center, 3 Apr. 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/03/gender-pay-gap-facts/.

¹⁸⁶ Zirin, 185

The predominantly white, straight, and male composition of the sports media thus serve as gatekeepers of the established hegemony, ignorantly broadcasting their implicit biases to be consumed and absorbed by captive audiences. Though they are supportive of these athletes in their efforts to incite change, still they reproduce the same culture that works to oppress them.

Those who resent this growing intersection of politics and sports, then, do so out of a lack of understanding of how sports media works to support hegemonic ideals, more so because they themselves are the ones benefitting from it. Dylan Gwinn, an outspoken (white) critic of the changes within sports media, denounces it as “just another front of liberal activism.”¹⁸⁷ “Almost every sports fan wants sports to be a politics-free zone, and our job as media isn’t to insert realism into people’s escapism,” he writes in his book *Bias in the Booth*, an exposition on how sports media distorts the news. “Sports media should serve the sports fans, not push the commentators’ political agendas, and not push athletes to make political statements.”¹⁸⁸ One challenge to his statement, however, is to question which people’s escapism is it really, and what are the broader implications in viewing sports as an escape rather than as an extension of the real world? Similar to the limitations of racial colorblindness, seeing sports as a getaway from the real world is to ignore the very real issues that these athletes, particularly minority athletes, continue to face on the field and in broadcasts. These portrayals endorsing inferior stereotypes, combined with the neglect of those athletes who do not fit societal norms, are then exposed to and absorbed by an unassuming audience that is expecting only to be

¹⁸⁷ Gwinn, introduction

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 6

entertained, not challenged—they use athletes for entertainment but neglect to care about them as people. Gwinn does not realize the impact of these broadcasts because he does not recognize the underlying implicit bias, since that which is presented in the media aligns with his own white, heterosexual male outlook.

The increase in athlete activism and its various degrees of societal acceptance has, at least, brought awareness to issues that have been neglected, reigniting past discussions and inciting dialogues where there were none. The mixed response to black athletes taking a knee makes their protests all the more necessary, while the overwhelming support for the coming out of gay athletes serves to inspire other closeted players to do the same. One critical component in inspiring this increase has been social media as a tool for athletes to reach out to their fans directly as well as being a public forum for audiences to challenge dominant media representations and norms. *New Yorker* reporter Hua Hsu notes that athletes have always been political, but never before have they been able to so easily explain themselves to the public and without as harsh of consequences as they once faced. “It’s what makes today’s players seem so different: their capacity to share more in a late-night Instagram post than a decade of carefully stage-managed, Nike-approved Jordan documentaries,” writes Hsu. “Maybe the difference between then and now is just an instinctive awareness that everything is political.”¹⁸⁹

Rather than resent this intrusion of the political into their “escape from reality,” fans are supportive of their favorite athletes engaging with societal issues. Though certainly there are those who disagree with certain points of view, overall athlete activism

¹⁸⁹ Hsu, Hua. “The Political Athlete: Then and Now.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 29 Sept. 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-political-athlete-then-and-now.

has been met with acceptance and positivity, encouraging and inspiring other athletes to lend their own voices to these discourses, even if only through a short, declarative post on Twitter. This new reality of politically vocal athletes in addition to the more personal fan-to-athlete engagement has altered the very way that we, as fans, interact with sports. This more intimate access into their personal lives allows for a greater freedom for athletes and a more personal viewing experience for fans, where they see athletes as people rather than just players on a field. In having athletes use their platforms for social activism, they are bringing awareness of these issues to a broad array of social groups within society and challenging hegemonic norms. The first step in dismantling the oppressive rhetoric of mainstream media is to bring awareness to the power groups within the media and how they work to perpetuate exclusion and prejudice, if unintentionally.¹⁹⁰ As sports fans, it is only by engaging more actively with the discourse presented in broadcasts and challenging their biased presentations that allows us to challenge our own biases.

“The thing that frustrated me and pissed me off a little bit is the fact that [Trump] used the sports platform to try to divide us, and sports is so, so amazing,” James said at a news conference after the divisive tweets. Though here he discredits sports as a place of division, James brings up an important point that can be applied to this topic as well: rather than condemning sports and sports media for their complicity in oppressing minorities, embrace them for the progress they have made and for the opportunities they present in challenging traditional stereotypes, changing the discussions, and shifting societal views. Black athletes can be intelligent, women can be powerful, and gay athletes can be masculine. “What sports can do for everyone, no matter the shape or size or race

¹⁹⁰ Hylton, 4

or ethnicity or religion or whatever,” continued James. “People find teams, people find players, people find colors because of sport, and they just gravitate toward that and they just make them so happy. And it brings people together like none other.”¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ Carissimo, Justin. “LeBron James Says Trump ‘Used the Sports Platform to Try to Divide Us.’” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 25 Sept. 2017, www.cbsnews.com/news/lebron-james-donald-trump-nba-nfl-comments-sports-platform-divide-us/.

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