

ULTRAVIOLET

THE
INCLUSION
PLAYBOOK

WOMEN'S SPORTS MEDIA GUIDE



INTRODUCTION	03
AVOID UNNECESSARILY-GENDERED LANGUAGE	05
CENTER ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENTS	06
AVOID GENDER STEREOTYPES	07
DON'T PERPETUATE RACIALLY PROBLEMATIC STEREOTYPES	08
THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACK WOMEN IN SPORTS	10
EDUCATE YOURSELF ON LGBTQ INCLUSION	11
4 MYTHS ABOUT TRANS WOMEN IN ATHLETICS	12
RESPECT WOMEN'S SPORTS HISTORY	14
ELEVATE EXPERT VOICES	15
EMBRACE COMPLEX NARRATIVES	16
BE VERY CAREFUL WHEN TALKING ABOUT BODIES	17
COMMIT TO EQUITABLE COVERAGE	18

INTRODUCTION

WOMEN'S SPORTS ARE BOOMING.

Women's sports are booming right now. In 2024, for the first time in history, the women's NCAA basketball championship game received more viewers than the men's. Long-tenured women's pro sports leagues, such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), are seeing team valuations surpass the \$100 million mark and setting attendance and viewership records on a weekly basis. New pro women's sports leagues, such as the Pro Volleyball Federation (PVF) and Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL), have just completed groundbreaking inaugural seasons.

Historically, women's sports have received less than 6% of sports media coverage on SportsCenter and local TV stations. A 2023 study found that, when including streaming and social media, that percentage increased to 15 percent. No matter which number you focus on, it's clear that the recent growth in the visibility and viability of women's sports demands an increase of media coverage.

2.5x
MORE
WOMEN'S
SPORTS
COVERAGE

15%
IN 2023



6%
PRE-2023

IN TODAY'S EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SPORTS JOURNALISM, IT'S CRUCIAL THAT COVERAGE OF WOMEN'S SPORTS IS EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE, AND RESPECTFUL.



Proper coverage of women's sports ensures visibility and recognition, contributing to gender equality in media representation, inspiring young girls, and promoting greater participation in sports. It also helps combat stereotypes and biases, fostering a fair and balanced view of women's capabilities and achievements. Increased media attention can lead to better funding, sponsorship, and resources for women's athletics, facilitating their growth and development. Ultimately, quality reporting helps shift public perception and foster a more inclusive culture, both in sports and society at large.

THIS GUIDE OFFERS A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO COVERING WOMEN'S ATHLETICS WITH INTEGRITY AND RESPECT.

By following these best practices, reporters can help dismantle outdated stereotypes, highlight athletic achievements, and respect the rich history of women's sports. Whether you're a seasoned journalist or new to the field, these principles will help you deliver thoughtful and impactful sports coverage.



01 AVOID UNNECESSARILY GENDERED LANGUAGE

Before using gendered language in your sports reporting, be sure that it is relevant, respectful, necessary, and correct. **The use of gendered language unnecessarily– or incorrectly– can undermine your coverage of women in sports.**

- Don't use gender qualifiers, like "female athlete" or "women's basketball" when just using "athlete" or "basketball" would work.
- Don't call adult women "girls" or "ladies."

FOCUS ON THE SUBJECT

~~FEMALE~~
ATHLETE

~~WOMEN'S~~
BASKETBALL

02 CENTER ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENTS

When reporting on women's sports, **don't forget about the "sports" part of the equation.** A lot of coverage of women's sports primarily spotlights their gender, which only serves to further marginalize women.

- Focus on on-court/field performances and skills before off-court details that aren't relevant (e.g., relationships, appearance, and fashion).
- Embrace tactical analysis! Breaking down Xs and Os taking deep dives into advanced statistics enhances *all* sports coverage.
- There are times when it is appropriate to highlight who an athlete is off of the court/field of play, but make sure that such stories supplement your on-court coverage rather than displace it.

FOCUS ON THE ACHIEVEMENTS

~~SIGNIFICANT OTHER~~
MVP
~~LOOKS~~
STATISTICS
~~OUTFIT~~
SKILLS

03 AVOID GENDER STEREOTYPES

All humans have biases, whether they're explicit or implicit. When covering women's sports, it is important to be extra careful **not to accidentally perpetuate prevalent tropes and clichés about women.**

- Don't pigeon-hole women as "emotional," "maternal," "ladylike," or "delicate."
- Don't characterize women's sports (or women themselves) as less competitive than—or the lesser version of—men's sports.
- Allow for nuance in your characterization of athletes in women's sports.

CLUTCH EXAMPLE

Just as coverage of disabled athletes is often limited to "inspiration porn," women in sports are often portrayed only as infallible role models. While it is important for young girls to have positive role models, nobody is perfect. Coverage of athletes in women's sports shouldn't gloss over bad moments or uncomfortable truths to fit a preconceived notion.

04 DON'T PERPETUATE RACIALLY PROBLEMATIC STEREOTYPES

Intersectionality is a big part of women's sports. Not only do many of the athletes face barriers because of their gender, but some experience additional discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, or religion. **Be sensitive to the fact that descriptors you use for a white woman might carry a different connotation altogether when used for a Black, Brown, or Indigenous woman.**

- Don't reinforce racist tropes. This includes framing Black women as "angry," Asian athletes as "meek/quiet," and Latina players as "spicy/hot-tempered."
- Don't default to praising athletes of color, especially Black women, for their athleticism/power/brute force while reserving terms such as "cerebral," "smart," and "savvy" for white athletes.
- Report on women of color with the same grace you would give their white counterparts.

CLUTCH EXAMPLE

REINFORCING STEREOTYPES

During a game between Nigeria and Germany at the [2019 Women's World Cup](#), Fox commentators praised all African teams for having "pace and physicality," and remarked that a white, European coach had honed in on the "athleticism" of Nigeria's team by teaching them "proper tactical and technical aspects to their game." The commentators were criticized for reinforcing colonial stereotypes, essentially painting African soccer players on the sport's biggest stage as savages who needed to be tamed.

04 DON'T PERPETUATE RACIALLY PROBLEMATIC STEREOTYPES (CONT.)

CLUTCH EXAMPLE

UNEVEN SCRUTINY

Sometimes racism is perpetuated in media coverage by not giving Black athletes the grace you would give their white counterparts. In 2012, Gabby Douglas became the first Black gymnast to win gold in the Olympic all-around competition. After her triumph, the media hyper-fixated on criticisms of her hair on social media, using a few tweets as a chance to paint the entire Black community, and Black women in particular, as unsupportive. Her family was also subjected to intense scrutiny from the media, who worked to uncover stories that would showcase Douglas's Black parents as broke, dysfunctional, and often absent.

In 2016, when Douglas returned to the Olympics on Team USA, her every move was dissected. The LA Times criticized her for being "unpatriotic" due to her "slouching" and "pouting" on the podium after winning gold for USA in the team competition.

THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACK WOMEN IN SPORTS MEDIA

THE COVERAGE OF BLACK WOMEN IN SPORTS HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN MARKED BY BOTH UNDERREPRESENTATION AND MISREPRESENTATION

Despite Black athletes in women's sports consistently breaking barriers and records--from Wilma Rudolph, known as the fastest woman in the world, to Simone Biles, the most decorated gymnast in world championship history--Black women often face systemic barriers that limit their visibility and recognition in the media. When they are covered, the focus can skew toward stereotypes and sensationalism. For example, when Florence Griffith Joyner shattered records as the fastest woman in history, the media frequently focused on her nails and hair rather than her extraordinary achievements.

Similarly, despite WNBA rookie Angel Reese's remarkable athletic prowess, she is often portrayed as a villain rather than being recognized as an elite athlete. This disparity reflects broader societal issues of race and gender inequality, where the accomplishments of Black women are frequently overshadowed by bias and lack of equitable support. There has been a gradual shift as more athletes, fans, and media outlets push for inclusive and accurate representation. Journalists should help continue this positive trend by being mindful of their portrayal of all women of color in athletics.



Photo credit: Florence Griffith Joyner courtesy of Ronald Reagan Library, Angel Reese courtesy of [John McClellan](#).

05 EDUCATE YOURSELF ON LGBTQ+ INCLUSION

There are many LGBTQ+ people in the women's sports community. **It is important to be respectful of that**, both in your interactions with athletes, fans, and coaches, and in your reporting.

- Know the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation.
- Don't assume you know an athlete's sexual orientation or gender identity based on how they look.
- Ask for pronouns and respect them.

KNOW THE FACTS

Gender identity is what gender you identify as, while sexual orientation is about what gender(s) you are drawn to romantically.

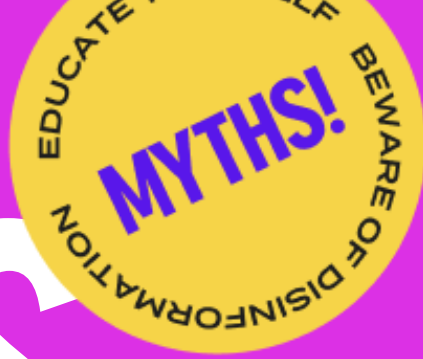
For more key LGBTQ+ terms for journalists, check out [GLAAD's Media Reference Guide](#).

- Use gender-neutral terms when asking an athlete about their personal life, such as "family" or "partner" or "support system," unless you know for sure what genders their loved ones are and what pronouns they use.
- Not all athletes in women's sports are women; some might identify as nonbinary. It is appropriate to use phrases such as "athletes in women's sports" rather than "women athletes" to be inclusive of nonbinary and gender-nonconforming athletes.
- While not all athletes in women's sports identify as women, trans women athletes ARE women and should be reported on respectfully.

TRANS YOUTH IN SPORTS

Reporting on youth in sports? Check out [this guide](#) for journalists reporting on young trans athletes.

4 MYTHS ABOUT TRANS WOMEN IN ATHLETICS



MYTH

MEN PRETEND TO BE WOMEN IN ORDER TO WIN WOMEN'S ATHLETIC COMPETITIONS.

FACT

NEVER IN THE HISTORY OF SPORTS HAS A MAN EVER PRETENDED TO BE A WOMAN--OR CHOSEN TO TRANSITION--IN ORDER TO GAIN A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN WOMEN'S SPORTS.

Being openly trans, especially in a society where trans women face discrimination and violence, takes a lot of courage. Simply put: Trans women are women. Report on them accordingly.



MYTH

ALLOWING TRANS WOMEN TO COMPETE AGAINST CIS WOMEN THREATENS THE INSTITUTION OF WOMEN'S SPORTS.

FACT

TRANS WOMEN HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO COMPETE IN THE OLYMPICS SINCE 2004 AND THE NCAA SINCE 2011, AND WOMEN'S SPORTS HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE POPULAR.

Transgender athletes are not a threat to women's sports; rather, [research](#) shows that sports participation for all women and girls increases when trans-inclusive policies are on the books. Major threats to women's sports are, in no particular order: a lack of investment, abusive coaches, unsafe training facilities, unequal pay, and inequitable coverage by the media--not transgender athletes.

MYTH

TRANS WOMEN WILL DOMINATE WOMEN'S SPORTS.

FACT

TRANS WOMEN ARE NOT DOMINATING WOMEN'S SPORTS.

Like cisgender athletes, trans athletes have varied levels of success--sometimes they win, often they don't. Don't just sensationalize the few wins; report on the many losses, too.

To learn more about myths around trans athletes in sports, check out [Transgender Women Athletes and Elite Sports: A Scientific Review](#) (best for elite/professional sports) or [Fair Play](#) (best for youth sports).

MYTH

CIS WOMEN DON'T SUPPORT TRANS WOMEN IN SPORTS.

FACT

PRO WOMEN'S SPORTS LEAGUES SUCH AS THE WNBA, NWSL, PWHL, AND ATHLETES UNLIMITED ARE WELCOMING TO TRANS WOMEN.

Many prominent women athletes have also gone on record expressing support for trans inclusion in women's sports (e.g. Sue Bird, Dawn Staley, Megan Rapinoe, Brianna Turner). Further, major women's rights organizations unequivocally support the inclusion of transgender women in women's sports, such as the [National Women's Law Center](#), [Women's Sports Foundation](#), and [Gender Justice](#).



06 RESPECT WOMEN'S SPORTS HISTORY

While women's sports are getting unprecedented attention today, they've been around for decades, even centuries in some cases. **Look for opportunities to highlight that rich history in your reporting.**

- Don't talk about women's sports as if they are a new phenomenon.
- Put today's stories in the proper context by looking for historical comparisons in women's sports history. Elevate the trailblazers who have come before.
- Don't default to comparing an athlete in women's sports to a prominent male athlete; see if there is a female athlete you can use as a reference.

CLUTCH EXAMPLE

When Caitlin Clark was on her way to breaking all the scoring records in college basketball, media outlets used her journey as an opportunity to highlight and revisit the stories of two other record scorers in women's basketball history: [Lynette Woodard](#) and [Pearl Moore](#).

07 ELEVATE EXPERT VOICES

It's okay if you're new to women's sports. (In fact, welcome!) Nobody expects you to know everything right away. Prominent voices in the space will be happy to help fill in the gaps.

- Uplift the work and lean on the expertise of those who have been in the space for years.
- Incorporate opinions from coaches, analysts, and the athletes themselves to provide a well-rounded perspective.
- If you're leaning on the work of prominent voices, be sure to give them credit.

CLUTCH EXAMPLE



(L-R) Host Elle Duncan and analysts Andraya Carter and Chiney Ogwumike have been standouts in ESPN's NCAA Women's Tournament coverage. (Courtesy Chiney Ogwumike's X feed / ESPN)

08 EMBRACE COMPLEX NARRATIVES

Because women's sports have received so little coverage over the years, some people erroneously believe that all attention it attracts should be positive. **But in reality, women's sports will thrive when ALL stories are told—the good, the bad, and the ugly.**

- Don't shy away from telling difficult stories about women's sports, such as corruption and abuse.
- Don't pay attention to women's sports only when they're winning--tell stories about the losses, too, and the failures and the bad games. Those are part of sports.
- Remember that journalism is not PR.
- Athletes in women's sports, and women's sports themselves, are not fragile. You don't have to treat them with kid gloves--just respect.

TIPS FOR A GOOD NARRATIVE

TELL THE FULL STORY.



**ALL THE HIGHS, LOWS,
PAIN AND TRIUMPH
ALL DESERVE TO BE
DISCUSSED AS
APPROPRIATE.**

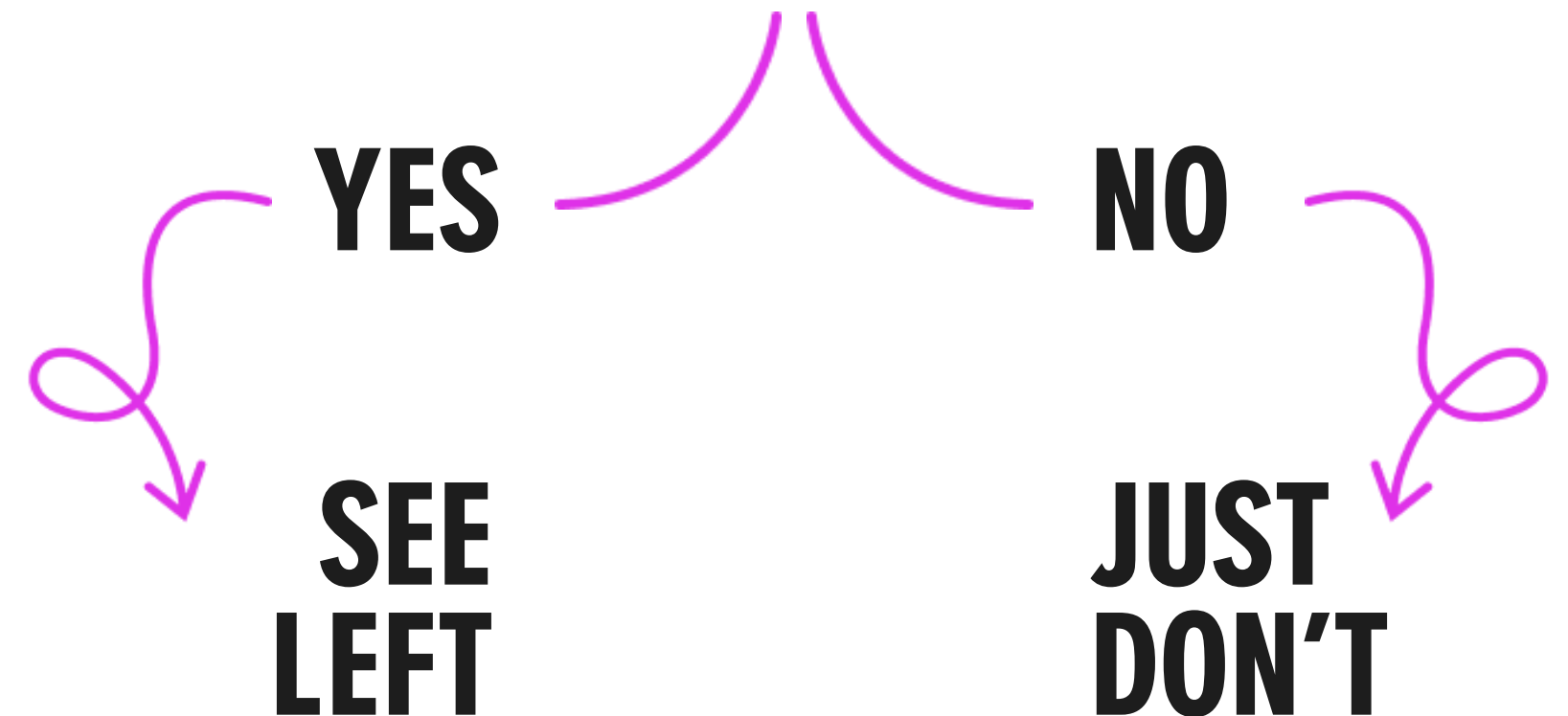
09 BE VERY CAREFUL WHEN TALKING ABOUT BODIES

It's sometimes necessary in sports to talk about an athlete's body. **Before you do this in women's sports, make sure it is both respectful and directly relevant to the story.**

- Don't sexualize women's bodies.
- Be extremely cautious if discussing weight or body shape. Recognize that women's bodies are built differently than men's in the aggregate and that conversations about weight and size are much more culturally complex for women.
- Racial stereotypes apply here too--be sensitive to descriptions of size/muscularity of Black women.
- When in doubt, don't.

TALKING ABOUT BODIES FLOW CHART

DO YOU NEED TO?



10 COMMIT TO EQUITABLE COVERAGE

Equitable coverage of women's athletics is something every journalist should strive for. It not only ensures the strength and continued success of women's athletics; it also shows a real investment in and respect for these athletes' talent and labor.

- Make sure women's sports receive the same level of attention and detailed reporting as men's sports.
- Regularly do an inventory comparing your men's and women's sports coverage to ensure it is equitable.
- Also pay attention to the racial makeup of the athletes you are writing about; your coverage within women's sports should be diverse, too.

CLUTCH EXAMPLES

For examples of exceptional coverage of women's athletics, check out these newsletters:

- [Power Plays](#): A bi-weekly newsletter that provides context to the biggest women's sports stories of the day with history lessons, media criticism, and sharp analysis.
- [Just Women's Sports](#): A daily newsletter that keeps you current on the most important results and breaking news stories in women's sports.
- [The Gist](#): A daily fan-first sports newsletter that provides equal coverage of women's and men's sports.
- [The IX](#): A newsletter that provides a curated guide to six different women's sports, six days a week.



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