

Females in Sport - past, present, and future: perceptions by a panel of female sport executives

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ABSTRACT

On Friday, April 8, 2005 in Philadelphia, PA at the Standing Conference for Management and Organization Inquiry (SCMOI), a panel of female sports experts was gathered to answer some interesting and difficult questions regarding females in sports. The panel consisted of the following: Ms. Lynn Tighe, Associate AD/SWA, Villanova University; Ms. Kim Keenan-Kirkpatrick, SWA, Lafayette College; Ms. Dei Lynam, Sports Anchor Reporter, Comcast Sportsnet; Ms. Karen Kopecky, Sports Marketing Manager; Ms. Ryan Heiden, Premium Services Event Manager, Philadelphia Eagles; Ms. Jamie Braunwarth, Compliance Assistant, Atlantic 10 Conference; and Ms. Connie Hurlbut, former Sr. Director of WNBA for Basketball Operations and Patriot League Executive Director. The historical perspective and attitudes of these women varied as did their years of experience and stages of their respective careers. For the purpose of this article the panelists were broken into two groups which were the experienced group (15 or more years in the sport industry) and the up-starts group (5 or less years in the sport industry). Both Ms. Heiden and Ms. Braunwarth were considered up-starts while the remaining panelists were experienced.

INTRODUCTION

Briefly speak on the historical perspective of individuals and events such as the following: Ms. Babe Didrikson Zaharias (ESPN's Top Fifty Athlete of the 1900's); Ms. Billy Jean King vs. Bobby Riggs in the Astrodome in 1974; and the women's movement of the 1970's.

The women panelists with more experience were able to talk about each of these items because they occurred during the early to middle part of their careers. They felt as though Babe Zaharias was the greatest, most well-known female athlete of the century. Not only was Zaharias exceptional in one sport, but she was also a multi-sport person that excelled at several sports. The panelists felt that she was viewed as the Jim Thorpe of her era. She was characterized as an aggressive female athlete during her career. The "mold" for women during that time was somewhat dainty, and she broke that mold. The term "aggressive" should not

be interpreted as negative because it really represented the stark contrast to women athletes during that period rather than a hostile athlete. The panelists felt that their perceptions of her were formed mostly from the ESPN piece about Babe Zaharias.

The "Battle of the Sexes" between Billy Jean King and Bobby Riggs occurred around the same time as Title IX and the initial thrust of the feminist movement. This event was a big deal not only because of the TV coverage and pre-match hype, but also because Billy Jean King was a highly regarded female tennis player. The panelists remembered how Bobby Riggs had beaten Margaret Court in an earlier "battle". When King beat Riggs it was a strong statement that women had arrived. The win certainly strengthened King's notoriety and pushed her into the limelight in an arena bigger than tennis; she became the leader of women's sports and the athlete voice of the feminist movement. During this period Billy Jean King, golf great Jane

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Blalock, and softball great Joan Joyce were instrumental in beginning the Women's Sport Foundation which thrives to this day.

The women's movement was part of the unrest that already existed in America with the Vietnam War coming to an end, the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960's still festering, the stunning loss of several prominent leaders in the 1960's (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy), the Kent State tragedy, the questioning of authority, and a great deal of mistrust with government with Watergate. Simply put, the late 1960's and early 1970's were a volatile time. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) emerged at this time with a country wide vote around 1978. People were uncertain about the impact that it would have on our culture and our way of life. There were clear advantages and disadvantages of it. In addition to this unstable condition the traditional role of men was being questioned and challenged. In fact, men became very uncertain as to how to act, and it led to a great deal of confusion for men. For example, some men were no longer sure if it was proper for them to open a door for a woman, or if it would offend her because she may perceive that gesture as if she was not strong enough to do it herself.

In the 1970's and 1980's what was the role of the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) especially as it related to the NCAA decision to take over women's collegiate athletics? The presidents of many institutions of higher education chose to merge with the NCAA because of the costs of the two different institutional fees. Was that a good decision?

The only women that knew of the AIAW were Ms. Tighe, Ms. Keenan-Kirkpatrick, and Ms. Hurlbut. They felt

that the decision to switch women's collegiate athletics to the control of the NCAA has been completed and fully transitioned for some time. These women thought that is was a good thing, in hindsight, but they admitted that they didn't understand the roots, history, and significance of the AIAW nor the negative impact the change had on women administrators and female coaches (details in a well-known longitudinal study by Acosta & Carpenter). There was a great deal of discussion on this topic and the women felt that the merger did save money, and from a business sense it was a good decision.

One woman shared her unique experience from the early 1970's as the first woman to ever get a press credential. It was for the New York Giants and Jets game that was played at Yale Bowl. This was the field that the Giants were using during the season when Yankee Stadium was being renovated. Receiving these press credentials was a big deal during that day and broke the barriers for other female reporters to eventually enter the locker rooms for interviews. Dee Lynam said that in her 20 years as a reporter, she has never experienced sexual overtones or felt intimidated while interviewing male athletes and coaches. One factor that may contribute to this is that often the director of promotions and/or media relations is a woman. This sets the stage for an environment that is effective for male and female reporters.

An insightful observation about the changing qualifications of the director of athletics occurred from the 1970's when retired, successful male athletes typically were hired in the position. In the 1980's & 1990's the focus changed to people, usually males, with a strong background in operations and logistics. The current trend is to hire people that

have experience as sport marketers and fund raisers, with only a handful of them being females.

Title IX in 1972 - purpose, reality, advantages, and disadvantages? Are we there?

The women with more experience and history had a great deal to say on this question. Even though not much was accomplished in the 1970's it was perceived as an evolution. In the 1980's it was spurred on by Proposition 48, and there was incredible growth in the latter part of that decade. By the 1990's the women felt that we started seeing bottom-line equality although some remorse was expressed about the male sports that took a hit as a result. Baseball and wrestling were two sports named by the panelists. They believe that it was never intended to harm men's sports, but it has and they wish that that piece could be corrected. Maybe a difficulty is with how it is measured - proportionality, etc.

The audience consisted of mainly people from an academic setting rather than an athletic one, and they did not bring much to the table in the way of comments. One gentleman with a coaching background for men's and women's crew felt that Title IX was a good thing. He felt that as a male you can't appreciate women's sports until you have a daughter even though most people disagreed with him on that statement. With ESPN's coverage of the women's collegiate basketball tournament, for example, there are revenue streams that turn a profit. Therefore, it does not need a "sugar daddy", if you will. The panel agreed that they always had hoped that it would get to the point where males and females alike enjoy women's sports, but they weren't sure that it would ever get to that point in the near future. As a result of Title IX and also the increased

media exposure, it has gotten to the current level.

The successes of the following: SWA (D-I, II, and III), LPGA, WNBA, 2004 U.S. Gold Medal winning teams in soccer, basketball, and softball.

The position of Senior Women's Administrator (SWA) at the Division I, II, and III collegiate level was deemed a success by the panelists. They did acknowledge disappointment in the fact that there are a handful of men and a similar number of secretaries filling this position across the country. The original purpose was to give women opportunities that may not have been open to them in previous years, especially when the NCAA began controlling women's sports at the collegiate level. Overall the panelists were glad that there is a SWA position.

In the last 15 years sports for women have really evolved, and women's professional sports have come a long way during this period of time, namely the LPGA and the WNBA. Hurlbut worked in the WNBA and made some astute comparisons to the ABL or ABA and the WNBA. The WNBA grew at the right pace and had a female commissioner. There was a built-in "sugar daddy" with the NBA, and that is why they are still in existence. The ABL did not have a "sugar daddy", paid too much for its players, played in high school gyms, and had no media support. Wisely, the WNBA had instant credibility by using the NBA venues; had television rights with the Lifetime Channel, NBC, and ESPN to show live games; the same sales and marketing departments in the NBA were used (the staff no longer had an off-season); and the season was from June to September, whereas the ABA went head-to-head with the NBA's competitive season. The NBA already

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had ticket holders in place so the WNBA was able to capitalize on that pool of people. For example in New York, individuals who bought Knicks were directly targeted for Liberty tickets, and some Knicks ticket packages included a certain number of Liberty tickets. People usually either used the tickets or gave them to someone who would use them so it guaranteed revenue from ticket sales and potential attendance at the games. Also the WNBA gave opportunities for women from an executive standpoint at all levels, including coaches.

The panelists noted that currently the Phoenix Mercury and Mohegan Sun (formerly the Orlando Miracle) are the only two WNBA teams that do not have a direct affiliation with an NBA franchise even though they both started with one. Connie said that recently the WNBA teams had been told by the NBA that they needed to start making money to become more self-sufficient. The business plan had changed so now the teams' more direct costs like salaries were to be paid by the teams, not the league. The new business plan was created as a result of the renegotiations with the players union that implemented free agency and a salary cap. Previously, the WNBA operated under the single entity theory, a legal structure that did not include a salary cap or free agency.

For the LPGA the panelists felt that the prize money is not equal, but it has come a long way in bridging that gap. The women with a business sense felt that if the TV ratings, revenue, etc. are at X-level for the men, and the women are at a lower revenue stream, then you HAVE to pay the men more; it is common sense and good business sense. This is at the professional level, not college or high school. From a business standpoint, when state dollars (schools) are impacted it is one thing, but at the professional level if

they lose money, business savvy says that you must close it down.

The panelists addressed the recent success at the Olympics for some of the women's teams that won gold medals (For example, in Athens, a gold medal for Women's Basketball, Soccer, and Softball). The NBC coverage really helped promote a ground swell of interest among girls ages 7-17. With that success and the acceptance of women playing sports, females are really benefiting. Several studies have shown the importance of women playing sports - for teamwork, getting out of domestic violence, and being stronger physically, emotionally, and mentally to deal with the ups and downs of life. The panelists wholeheartedly concurred with these benefits.

Why did the American Basketball League (ABL) and Women's Soccer League (WSL) fail and what can we learn from these leagues?

The sense among the panelists about the rise and fall of the Women's Soccer League (WSL) was addressed. A positive factor was the timing. It followed on the heels of a tremendous amount of media attention after the exciting World Cup in 1999 when the USA defeated China. There was a great deal of hype from the media when Brandi Chastain took off her shirt after scoring the winning penalty kick in overtime during that event watched by millions. Another positive element was the structure of the league. Instead of stockpiling one team with all the name athletes, they split up the talent across the league. The general consensus among the panelists was that the WSL fell short by not marketing the teams effectively to girls ages 7-17. As a result, there was no nag factor created by daughters to their parents - "I want to go to that game."

For the American Basketball League (ABL) mentioned in the previous

question, it paid too much for its players, played in high school gymnasiums, had no media support, and did not have a merchandising deal. Without a merchandising deal, where is the revenue stream? In professional sports the league must turn a profit and market to the correct target market. This is not true of sports at the high school and college level.

What does sexuality have to do with the success of female sports, for example Anna Kournikova?

Kournikova is definitely a sex symbol with a tennis racket. Although she has had some success (#8 in the world in 2000 and has won major championships as a doubles partner with Martina Hingis), she has not won a singles tennis tournament in her career. Lyman said one of the main reasons she's gotten these endorsement deals off the court is because of her looks, not her talent. It was felt that men do support women's sports and watch them on TV.

During your career as a female sports executive, how has the industry changed? Better, worse, same?

The experienced panelist's unanimous response was resoundingly positive - there are more opportunities now than ever before. Only two of the panelists remained quiet on this one because they lacked the historical perspective of the other women.

Ms. Lyman did a nice job addressing this question. She said that in her line of work, being in front of a camera, she and her husband made lots of sacrifices including the decision to delay having children. Dee purposely said that there are always younger women coming up looking for an opportunity and willing to take any opening. As a result, in her career she

was always afraid to take a day off because there were always younger people willing to step in and handle that day's assignments. She made lots of sacrifices and was always available any time of the day. In addition, because she did not have children at the time, people took advantage of her the same way they do with people that are single. The perception is that if a person is not married and/or does not have children then she is freer and has no responsibilities.

How do female executives balance their family and business lives?

The panelists with collegiate experience, Ms. Tighe, Ms. Keenan-Kirkpatrick, and Ms. Hurlbut, felt that college sports were more conducive for raising a family because it is a family-type atmosphere at the events. That part of the responsibility, supervising at events, provides a more flexible schedule with no manual work so it is not a problem having a child with you. It is more about being at the event to troubleshoot and to have a presence at the event. For other types of sport executives, balancing professional life with a family is different and less conducive to involving your family. For example, if you are courting the CEO of a company, it is inappropriate to have a child with you while you watch an event.

Is there a glass ceiling for female sport executives? Where are the female executives? What do you see the future holding? Please share stories and lessons.

Ms. Kopecky felt strongly that there are more opportunities for women now than ever before. More and more women see sports as a viable career option compared to those pursuing careers 20 years ago.

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Another interesting perception is that to be a female in a sports-oriented business can be an advantage because people do not expect you to know all the details. For example, when she is able to interject where Donovan McNabb went to college in an interview, people are impressed.

Karen reflected about the time she was emotionally upset because she was not asked to go on a trip that the other male sport marketing managers were taking. She felt that it was because she was a female and didn't know how to handle the situation. Should she address her boss? She cried and then decided to talk with her boss. After she explained her perceptions of the situation to him, she ended up not only getting an invitation on the trip but also an apology. He said that he didn't exclude her because she was a female - it was other factors.

In the world of sports radio one of the panelists felt as though there is not a glass ceiling. She does not get the sense that when she walks into a room with a group of males (sport radio personnel) that the environment changes from one with a male locker room mentality to a clean-it-up version of a conversation. As to the future, it is only going to get better.

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