

## Game, sex and match

*Sportswomen are beginning to score more commercial goals—but they still have a lot of ground to make up*



Maria Sharapova's shoulder injury stopped her playing in the US Open tennis tournament in New York this month. Not that she needs the prize money. The highest-paid female athlete in the world, she has earned \$29m this year. Women golfers and figure skaters do well too. But others don't. While sport has gained huge clout and wealth (the global industry is now worth up to \$620 billion, according to a study by A.T. Kearney, a consultancy) and women's participation has risen sharply, men still fare far better.

The number of girls participating in American high-school athletics, for example, has jumped to 3.2m from 300,000 in 1972, when a clause in an education bill called Title IX enshrined equal opportunities for students of both sexes, including in sports. The Tucker Centre at the University of Minnesota, which studies women in sport, says 40% of American athletic participants are female. But they receive less than 5% of all media coverage (and only 1.62% of sporting airtime on big networks). In 2004-2009 they comprised just 3.6% of the covers of ESPN The Magazine, a journal produced by a big sports media outlet.

Belatedly, this is beginning to change: women are breaking through in sports where physical strength and speed matter less or not at all. Even in muscular games such as football and rugby (pictured above), they are seeing slivers of the action, the glory—and the financial rewards.

In February a lap taken at 196mph gained Danica Patrick a pole position in part of the NASCAR Sprint Cup series—the first woman to do so, in a sport dominated by men. She won \$6m last year plus \$9m in sponsorship deals; ESPN The Magazine put her on its cover. That highlights a big advantage for women: once they gain initial recognition, glamour can kick in. Ms Patrick has appeared in a record 12 ads in the past seven years for the Super Bowl, American football's championship game.

At the international level, women have never done better. London 2012 was the first Olympic games with at least nominal female participation from every country, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei. America's investment in its women athletes paid off: they won more medals than their male teammates. Viewers paid attention. South Africa's most-watched event was a women's football match against Sweden, and a peak British audience of 3.9m tuned in to watch the national women's football team beat Brazil.

Such success helps bring better media coverage, and all the benefits that come in its wake. In August BT Sport, a British television channel, started showing big matches from the Football Association's Women's Super League, launched in 2011. Women's football is the fourth-largest team sport in England, measured by participation (after men's football, rugby and cricket). The country's female cricketers recently beat Australia in the women's Ashes, and three of the shorter matches in the series were shown live on Sky Sports, Britain's main satellite channel.

These changes are altering the culture of sport. Old-fashioned attitudes are beginning to look indefensible. Sir Stirling Moss, a Formula One champion, once doubted whether women had the "mental aptitude" for motor racing. Sepp Blatter, president of FIFA, the governing body of world football, expressed a wish in 2004 for female players to compete in "more feminine garb", suggesting that they wear "tighter shorts".

Glamour and sizzle do help sportswomen build their brand. This can be strikingly unfair. Marion Bartoli won the women's tennis championship at Wimbledon amid scalding criticism of her looks. Ms Patrick, the NASCAR star, has turned down offers to pose naked. Such pressure annoys those who think sportswomen should be famed for their prowess, not their sex appeal. It may backfire too. Research conducted by Mary Jo Kane, a sport sociologist, and colleagues, suggests that sexualised images of female athletes turn off women and older men and so "alienate a core fan base". Males aged 18-34 liked them, but for other reasons.

### **Cashing in**

Respect for women's sport is not just politically correct. Administrators and media bosses are also spotting a commercial opportunity with male fans. More men than women watch female football matches; 55% of American men in a survey last month said they preferred watching women's tennis to men's.

America's main sports network, ESPN, has agreed to extend coverage of professional women's basketball until 2022. That is good for sponsors: Coca-Cola, American Express, and adidas are just some of the partners of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Some female teams are reaping benefits too—though the men's game still subsidises the league.

Patriotism can play a part. A liquor company in Qingdao in eastern China is trying to lure Hsieh Su-Wei, the first Taiwanese to win a Grand Slam title after her women's doubles victory at Wimbledon. It has offered her \$1.6m a year in sponsorship, almost 36 times what she currently receives, if she takes Chinese citizenship.

Outside tennis and a handful of other sports, the inequalities in pay are still striking. A player with six or more years of service in the WNBA in America could earn a maximum salary of \$107,500 last season, whereas Kobe Bryant alone received more than \$30m from the LA Lakers. Last year male Indian cricketers were paid the equivalent of \$10,500 per Test match; their female counterparts earned only \$1,500 for an entire international series. Differing public appeal may explain some of the gap, but not all of it. Brian Cookson, president of British Cycling, who is campaigning to head the sport's governing body, the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), wants professional women participants to receive a minimum wage from their teams, as men already do.

An easy change to make would be in sports where women can compete alongside men, albeit for different prizes. A petition for women to be allowed to ride in the Tour de France has attracted 93,000 signatures. Oxford and Cambridge Universities will from 2015 hold the women's boat race on the same day and same course as the men's event. Ellie Piggott, a former Oxford rower and Olympic hopeful, says oarswomen are only now getting the kit and training perks that their male counterparts have been enjoying for years.

Female forays into new areas of sporting achievement are not a one-way street. Men are also taking up activities once dominated by women. Kentrell Collins leads Prancing Elites, an all-

male cheerleading squad from Mobile, Alabama. He also makes their skimpy costumes. "The girls do it, so why can't we?" he says.

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