Introduction:

“Sexist attitudes and stereotypes also plague women’s sports. Andy Benoit of Sports Illustrated recently tweeted that ‘women’s sports in general (are) not worth watching’.” (Berri, 2015). When one Googles the term “female athletes” they are presented with a range of photographs of different professional athletes. Once one scrolls past the names of these females they are greeted by headings such as, The Top 50 Hottest Female Athletes of 2016 (The Athletic Build, 2016) and Ultimate List of Hottest Female Athletes In The World, (Total Sportek, 2016). “But despite giving performances on par with their male counterparts, some say female athletes still don’t seem to get the credit they deserve. Critics say it's proof that sexism is still an issue for female competitors, reports Jamie Yuccas of CBS News' digital network, CBSN.” (CBS, 2016).

When Hungarian swimmer Katinka Hosszu set a new world record and won her first Olympic gold, some of the focus fell on her husband and coach, Shane Tusup. ‘There's the guy responsible for turning Katinka Hosszu, his wife, into a whole different swimmer,’ said an NBC commentator.” (CBS,2016). “On Sunday, another comment directed at a female swimmer drew criticism. ‘A lot of people say she swims like a man -- she doesn't swim like a man! She swims like Katie Ledecky!’ said an NBC commentator. In a similar case this tweet from the Chicago Tribune, where trapshooter and bronze medalist Corey Cogdell was first identified not by her name, but as the ‘wife of a Bears' lineman.’” (CBS, 2016). Witnessing similar comments and reporting about female athletes is the fuel behind this research proposal. Specifically, I am addressing the question: “How are female athletes typically represented in American media?” This type of representation is not just limited to newspapers, but to all forms of media including: Print, Broadcasting, Advertisements, News, and social media posts. It interests me because of the reaction. Women have come so far in advancing their rights, but I am now realizing we shouldn’t
stop at just achieving the right, instead furthering it and ensuring that yes, we can compete, but we deserve to be represented equally as well.

**Literature review: background and context**

In June, 1972 President Nixon signed a federal law, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 stating, “*No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.*” (The United States Department of Justice, 2015). Title IX gives female athletes the right to equal opportunity in sports in educational institutions that receive federal funds, from elementary schools to colleges and universities. (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2011). While the number of female athletes at NCAA schools has increased from less than 30,000 to over 193,000 since 1972, women still have 60,000 fewer participation opportunities than their male counterparts (Dusenbery & Lee, 2012). Even though female students comprise 57% of college student populations, female athletes received only 43% of participation opportunities at NCAA schools which is 63,241 fewer participation opportunities than their male counterparts (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2015). To go even further, when examining median expenses in NCAA Division I institutions, women’s teams receive only 40% of college sports operating dollars and 36% of college athletic team recruitment spending (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2015).

The pay gap also applies to the professional field. The USA Women’s soccer team had five top members of the team file a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), alleging that their team had been paid significantly less than their male counterparts. U.S. Soccer called the complaint (signed by Hope Solo, Carli Lloyd, Becky Sauerbrunn, Alex Morgan and Megan Rapinoe) misleading, because the men and women are
paid differently under collective-bargaining agreements. In June, just before the Summer Olympics, a federal judge agreed, ruling that the women did not have the right to seek improved conditions and wages — or strike — until their contract expires in December (Brodeur, 2016). In a letter to the head of Soccer United Marketing, Murray asked for detailed information on the commercial and revenue agreements that might explain the wage disparity between the men’s and women’s teams. “We strongly believe that pay disparities like the one between the teams send the wrong message to young people and have no place in the 21st century economy” (Brodeur, 2016). Murray’s letter cited stats from U.S. Soccer’s 2016 Annual General meeting which said that the 2015 Women’s World Cup viewership on Fox networks set a record for soccer in general (Brodeur, 2016).

Not only are women shorted in participation, but also in coverage. A 20-Year Study of Network and Cable by USC and Purdue Sociologists Finds Men Took 96% of Sports News in 2009 Even the ESPN Ticker gave women short shrift — 96.4 percent of the information scrolling along the bottom of the screen was dedicated to only men’s sports. The finding is part of a 20-year study of sports coverage released by University of Southern California sociologist Mike Messner and Purdue University sociologist Cheryl Cooky. Though it wasn’t surprising to discover that men’s sports gets more coverage, it was eye opening when researchers found that women’s sports accounted for less than 2 percent of network news and ESPN SportsCenter. “There’s a message that sports is still for, by and about men,” Messner said. “When will the news catch up?” Just as shocking is that as more women than ever participate in all levels of sports, coverage of their gender is drastically declining. In 2004, network affiliates dedicated 6.3 percent to women’s sports. Last year, the figure dropped to 1.6 percent. (North-Hager, 2010). In speaking with James Marchiony, The Associate Athletic Director of Communications/Media
Relations at the University of Kansas has divulged his feelings on the way female athletes are represented in the media, “In some respects, yes. I think it is probably true that women have to achieve a higher level of success to receive coverage that men’s sports do, but I also think that women’s sports are receiving more coverage than they used to” (Marchiony, Personal Interview, November 2016). I would like there to be more coverage of women’s sports. The Kansas City Star did a story last night about our women’s basketball team. We beat Memphis yesterday and they would never have done a story on that game if seven of our women weren’t ejected from the game because they came off the bench too far during a scuffle on the court between one of our players and one of Memphis players. So the Star turned that into an online story. They never would have covered that game at all and the score might not have even gotten in, in my opinion, if those ejections hadn’t have happened. (Marchiony, Personal Interview, November 2016).

The representation of female athletes in the media, while minimal, is also sexist and objectifying, “Unlike male athletes, female athletes do not have the luxury of being primarily portrayed as performance athletes, as coverage of their beauty and sex appeal usually overshadow highlights of their on-field endeavors. Depicting female athletes in suggestive poses and clothing, or even nude, magazines and commercials basically project a “woman first, athlete second” attitude that challenges athletes’ achievements and self-esteem.” (Liang, 2011). Athletes are either being depicted suggestively or not at all. Companies such as Puma and Nike use models in their advertisements opposed to female athletes. Meryl Davis, former Olympic skater posted side by side photos of Bella Hadid in Nike gear, Kylie Jenner in a puma outfit, and one of Olympic gymnast Aly Raisman in Reebok and tweeted, “I’ll take the one promoted by the athlete please,” along with a muscle emoji shortly after Bella Hadid landed a deal with Nike. (Mazziotta, 2016).
Along with objectifying, some athletes have even been victims of body shaming. After the Rio Olympics Summer 2016, Alexa Moreno, who is a 4’10” and 99 lbs gymnast was compared to a pig via twitter after competing in the women’s all- around qualification. Amanda Beard, a former Olympic swimmer says that preconceived ideas of what an athlete’s body should look like doesn’t mean they’re not a standout in their sport. “A six pack does not make you mentally tough to defeat your competitor. Ripped biceps doesn’t mean you are better. Putting in the work and having the drive in your heart is what makes people stand out,” Beard says. “A body is just a shell but how you move it is what puts you above everyone else.” (Mazziotto, 2016). Female athletics are even presented in a degrading way according to, Michael Messner, a University of Southern California professor who focuses on gender and sociology in sports, taped basketball games and tennis matches to compare the reporters’ commentary about women to that about men. Messner and his colleagues found that, by constantly displaying pink on-screen logos and reminding viewers that they were watching women’s games, the commentators “gender marked” competitions to maintain a “necessary sense of clarity for the viewers,” especially when the men’s and women’s competitions took place in the same arena. (Liang, 2011).

Media representation of female athletes is dangerous to society. Involving every source of media this attitude society has created towards female athletes is demeaning and has created a norm in the way we view athletic women. Regardless of how talented these athletes are they are continuously ridiculed for the way they look rather than their performance. Female athletes are taking a stand against this kind of behavior. However, it is going to be a long process to change the American media’s attitude towards female athletes.
Creating new knowledge:

New research could add to the body of knowledge on my topic, giving insight on information that is yet to exist. The main thing that demands more attention in order to produce a thorough research is the effect that this leaves on female sports. We know there is a pay gap, objectification in media, and unequal opportunities for female athletes compared to their male counterpart. However, how does this effect the women themselves? Is this causing young women to quit sports before they get to the college age? Does it have psychological effects on self-confidence and value?

There needs to be a clear and concise study regarding female athletics. Define an equal pay wage, equal air time, and code of conduct for sports reporters. If the public is unaware of the need for change or the severity of the issue they can in no way help to stop it. Some may think that female athletes have just as many equal opportunities as their male counterparts and that there is no problem at hand. Thus it is necessary to define all issues publicly so that the people can do something about it. If they are informed they can begin to stand up and fight for equal opportunities. As a result, inadequate information has the potential to prolong this treatment and has the possibility to damage women’s sports for generations to come.

Bibliography


