EMERALD STUDIES IN SPORT AND GENDER

THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF WOMEN'S SPORT

Issues and Debates

EDITED BY ALI BOWES AND ALEX CULVIN

The Professionalisation of Women's Sport

Emerald Studies in Sport and Gender

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The Professionalisation of Women's Sport: Issues and Debates

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Issues and Debates in the Professionalisation of Women's Sport

Ali Bowes and Alex Culvin

Abstract

This chapter introduces and sets the scene for a discussion on women's sport in a professional era. Initiated in the wake of the second-wave feminist movement in America in the 1950s with the professionalisation of golf and tennis, the move for other women's sports to be professionalised has been slow, sporadic and marred with difficulties. However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been significant changes in the landscape of elite women's sport. Alongside an overview of the developments in elite level women's sport, we conceptualise the terms 'professionalisation', 'professional' and 'professionalism'. Furthermore, the chapter identifies the scope of the book, drawing upon the importance to consider women's sport as distinct from men's sport and identifying issues that are specific to female athletes, such as maternity and the gender pay gap. We also recognise the diverse and multiple nature of women's identities, highlighting the intersectionality of female athletes in professional sport (specifically around race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and national identity).

Keywords: Professionalisation; women's sport; gender; professional; semi-professional; sport as work

Introduction

In light of the well-documented boom of women's sport across the globe, there are increasing moves towards the (semi-)professionalisation of elite women's sport. Considering women as professional athletes is not a new phenomenon, but it is becoming increasingly common in a diverse range of contexts. Specifically, Lough and Geurin (2019) indicate that the evolution and professionalisation of women's sports has been dramatic, and the industry will continue to grow. Women are claiming space in sport at the highest level, receiving more column inches, more

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airtime and, for some, more financial reimbursement than their predecessors could have dreamt of. The world of women's sport is constantly shifting and progressing, although women's sports are often discussed as a poor relation to 'real' sport, that is men's sport. There are experts on women's sport who try to understand, dissect and even explain this asymmetry between the sexes. Similarly, the media are keen to portray annually that 'now is the time for women's sport'. The focus of this conversation tends to be how we can make women more equal to men in sport. However, more pressing questions are: where are women's sports now and where are they going?

Men's professional sports stars are often associated with celebrity lifestyles and financial gain (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). However, most women athletes do not own a flashy sports car, a holiday home or consider themselves a celebrity. Their careers are short, insecure and precarious, all of which, compounded by their gender. They operate in a sports market that places value on traditionally male characteristics of aggression, strength, stamina and speed. Commonly heard sentiments have limited our imagination for women's sport: a woman should not be aggressive or competitive. Or can she? Women's sports will never gain as much interest as men's sports. Or will they? Who wants to watch women's sport when the 'real', men's version – more competitive, aggressive, faster and stronger version – dominates television, print and digital media? However, in recent years, women's sport has shown that with a big enough stage and with the correct framing, it can draw in both crowds and interest. Thus, women's involvement in professional sport is both interesting and challenging in the same regard yet has warranted only limited attention in academic circles. This book aims to redress this imbalance.

The purpose of this collection is twofold: firstly, to document and critique the increasing professionalisation seen in some women's sports, across the globe. We do this by drawing attention to the way in which this process is unique – and by that we mean distinct from the professionalisation processes in men's sport – and both bound by and influenced by wider social structures. Secondly, it will go some way to outlining the nuances involved for women as professional athletes and highlight the complexities of women carving out a career in the male-dominated space of sport. Important to note here is that the shift into professionalisation is one dominated by characteristically imperialist sports, by Western sports organisations. With this in mind, this collection presents a variety of case studies from different sports and contexts, each highlighting the complex, multi-faceted and at times problematic nature of women's involvement in professional sport. As Lenskyj (2012) notes, women's experiences of elite sport are shaped by discrimination and oppression – not only due to their gender but also along lines of race, ethnicity, sexuality and social class. Contributions in this collection pay attention to the intersectional nature of women's varied experiences in professional sport, acknowledging that women's experiences as professional athletes are not homogenous.

The initial interest for putting this book together stems from our experiences as women interested in sport, where professional women athletes were something of a dream. Spending time in and around the professional women's sports world – Ali

supporting and researching women's professional golf, Alex playing and researching women's professional football – prompted our academic interests in documenting the changing face of women's sport as it undergoes a process of professionalisation. It was clear to us that the lived reality of being both a sport professional and a woman is one of contradiction; a fine balance of gratefulness in the opportunity to get paid to play, offset with financial precariousness, shaped by gendered expectations, coupled with the feeling that women are second-class citizens in the sports field. Despite this, the business of women's sport is one that continues to grow, and, significantly for this edited collection, making a living from sport is no longer seen as the exclusive domain of men (Williams, 2013). The remainder of this introduction sets the scene for the collection, highlighting the conditions that have led to the increasing professionalisation of women's sport, providing a brief historical overview of women's inclusion in sport, documenting significant junctures in the professionalisation of women's sport, before defining the key terms that will underpin the rest of the collection.

Women in Sport

The inclusion of women in sport, both in recreational and professional terms, is one that has been mediated by societal-gendered expectations. It is an oft-cited notion that sport is 'an institution created by and for men' (Messner & Sabo, 1990, p. 9), orientating itself according to male values and norms. Sport has been inherently rooted in assumptions of hegemonic forms of masculinity (Messner & Sabo, 1990), which has historically made women's involvement in most sports problematic. Despite this, some women have had the opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity, although that is often along racialised and classed lines, and has in some instances involved the transfer of money. It is important to recognise that the relative newness of women's sport often presented in the media is not a fair representation; the history of women's sport is extensive and important to the current context. As Guttmann (1991, p. 1) states, 'blanket statements about the pre-nineteenth-century exclusion of women from sports are commonly uttered in blissful ignorance of the historical record', although it is noted that women's sports history has often been underwritten, relatively ignored in sports history accounts, and in accounts on the history of women in general (Osborne & Skillen, 2010). Importantly, the history of women in sport is often one that privileges the experiences of middle-class women from predominantly white, Western nations (Nauright, 2014).

Western women did much of the early work in writing women into accounts of sport history, and as such, the history of women in sport is still emerging (for example, Nauright, 2014). The history of women in sport in the Western world is one that has often been constrained by gender norms and/or medical myths (Gregg & Taylor, 2019). In both the United Kingdom (Osborne & Skillen, 2010), the United States (Gregg & Gregg, 2017), and Canada (Lenskyj, 1986), Victorian ideals shaped appropriate sporting behaviour, especially for white women. The frailty myth, alongside the ideology of motherhood and images of middle-class femininity, contributed to the systematic subordination of women in sports for

'years to come' (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 43), rendering sport inappropriate for women. Subsequently, women took part in little or no physical activity. In Australia in the early twentieth century, opportunities were extremely limited, and most women did not have the time, energy, or money to take part in sport (Little, 2014). Assumptions of social class, heteronormativity, racial norms, and women's frailty were interwoven throughout society and embedded into a cultural logic of who can and cannot be involved in sport. However, this is not to say that women were not taking part in any form of sport, and there are examples of pioneer women in sport throughout history.

Feminist commentators on sport have highlighted sport as a 'fundamentally sexist institution that is male dominated and masculine in orientation' (Theberge, 1981, p. 342), although women have continued to engage with sport as both athletes and spectators. Indeed, 'women's movement into sport (as athletes and spectators) has challenged the naturalization of gender difference and inequality, which has been a basic aspect of the institution of sport' (Messner & Sabo, 1990, p. 9). However, women's involvement in sport has historically been embedded with dominant ideologies of gender, race, social class and sexuality. While the 'glass ceiling' on women's involvement in sport may be lifting, it sits at different heights for different women, and it is at its highest for white, middle- or upper-class, heteronormatively feminine athletes. However, there are prominent women in sport who are shifting that narrative, notably by two of the most visible women athletes in world sports: the openly gay US women's soccer captain and 2019 world player of the year Megan Rapinoe, and the most successful woman tennis player of all time, Serena Williams. More recently, athletes are challenging the very notion of the term 'woman', with intersex South African athlete Caster Semenya and openly transgender Canadian soccer player Quinn highlighting the complexity of sex categories. Women operating in a sporting space are often restricted by normative notions of what it means to be a woman in a biological sense, as evidenced by World Rugby's position on transgender women in the sport, which adds further complexities to the notion of women as professional athletes.

Women's continued presence in sport, and their increasing position as professionals in this space, has the *potential* to subvert restrictive gender norms (Bowes & Kitching, 2020), although arguably this relies on parity, especially in the levels of support received by athletes. Women have operated as professionals in sport, in some form, throughout history. The trailblazers of sport in this regard have contributed to a reimagining of the capabilities of women. The proceeding discussion presents a brief history of women as professional athletes, accepting that the discussion is not complete, but a presentation of some key junctures in the professionalisation of women's sport.

Women in Professional Sport

The history of women in professional sport is one that is fractured, fragmented, and dominated by imperial sports in Western countries. Monetary exchange often occurred for women involved in pedestrianism and boxing in the late nineteenth century, yet cycling has been positioned as the oldest professional

sport for women, as described by Suzanne Schrijnder's contribution. However, it was the individual games of golf and tennis that really broke new ground for Western women in sport, specifically in the United States. Initiated in the wake of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1950s and 1960s, most notably with the formation of the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) and later the Women's Tennis Association (WTA), the sports are now considered the most successful, popular and lucrative forms of professional women's sport. The move for other sports, and specifically team sports, to follow this shift towards a professional era has been erratic and marred with difficulties.

Weiller and Higgs (1994) highlight the development of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) as one of the first, yet most successful, professional team sports for women in the history of the United States. Founded in 1942 amid World War Two as a response to the decreasing interest in men's Major League Baseball, where over 1,000 players were drafted into the Army (Weiller & Higgs, 1994), the AAGPBL existed until 1953. Attendance peaked in 1948 with over one million paid admissions (Weiller & Higgs, 1994), although the players were still restricted by notions of appropriate femininity expected of women during that time – players were subject to dress codes that included the wearing of make-up and short skirts. At a similar time, women's paid participation in golf was increasing. In 1950, the LPGA was identified as the ruling and administrative body for women's professional golf in the United States, an establishment that is now recognised as the longest running professional sports organisation for women in the world (Bae, 2012). However, the involvement of women in professional sport in its early existence is one that was heavily determined by racial and class backgrounds. In the twenty-first century, the game has seen huge growth across the globe; issues that Robbie Matz and Ali Bowes interrogate in their contribution.

Often considered the most significant advancement in professional women's sport was the development of the WTA in 1973, following Billie Jean King's success in the notorious 'battle of the sexes' tennis match against Bobby Riggs (Gregg & Taylor, 2019). Currently the most profitable sport for women, the history of their involvement is again one that is restricted by white, Western gendered ideal; a detailed socio-cultural history of the sport is presented in Rob Lake's contribution. There have been numerous attempts across the globe in establishing professional women's team sport leagues, with mixed success. One of the earliest examples of attempting to professionalise a women's team sport following the demise of the AAGPBL was in basketball, again in the United States. Staffo (1998) notes that despite women and girls taking part in the sport from as early as 1891, women's professional basketball in the United States has a short history and (much like all team sports) its development lagged far behind the men's form of the game. The inaugural Women's Basketball League (WBL) was established in the United States in 1978. Following its failure in 1981 after only three seasons, and the unsuccessful Women's Basketball Association (1993–1995), it was 1997 with the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) where a women's professional league has achieved success. Adam Rugg's contribution considers the social conditions which have influenced the

marketing of the WNBA, while Nola Aghi and David Berri investigate pay disparities in the sport.

The turn of the twenty-first century saw a proliferation of professionalising women's team sports across the globe (Taylor et al., 2019). In 2001, the first professional women's football (soccer) league was established in the United States, although not without problems. As the most popular sport for women across the globe, there are increasing examples of the professionalisation of the sport in a variety of contexts, including Asia and South America. The histories, and contemporary issues, of the professionalisation of women's football will be explored in a separate edited collection (Culvin & Bowes, forthcoming). North America has led the way in the professionalisation of women's team sports in the early twenty-first century. There have since been developments of (semi-)professional ice hockey leagues, which Stacey Leavitt and Carly Adams explore, and problematise, in their contribution on the National Women's Hockey League (NWHL).

What has proven most challenging for women in sport has been their inclusion into sports that are inherently tied to hegemonic notions of masculinity – specifically sports that valorise strength and aggression, such as combat sports, rugby union and American football. While football has developed as the most popular sport for women across the globe, other similarly male-dominated sports have been slower in terms of progress. Rugby has, in recent years, seen growths in professional opportunities for women operating across the different codes. Tracy Taylor and colleagues present a critical discussion of the professionalisation of women's rugby league in Australia, while Henrik Snyders presents a discussion on the struggles in the development of women's rugby union in South Africa in the post-apartheid era.

Although the landscape of elite women's sport is progressively changing, with Lough and Geurin (2019) proclaiming that women's sport is positioned to break new ground both socially and economically, there remains a need to investigate women's position within the domain of professional sport. The increasing commercialisation and mediatisation of women's sport brings unique challenges with it. As Rowe (2015) indicates, in the twenty-first century, the realm of (men's) professional sports are intricately tied to the mass media. He describes the intermeshing of the two institutions through the media-sport cultural complex (Rowe, 2003). Although the media exerts a level of control over women's sport and is often considered fundamental to its success as a professional entity, women's professional sports have developed in diverse ways to men's sport and their relationship with the sport media is notably different.

The Role of the Media, and New Media, in Professionalising Women's Sports

Media coverage of women's sport appears integral to its continuation in a professional format. Historically, research has been found to demonstrate a mismatch in coverage of men's and women's sports with Bruce (2016) highlighting that the representation of sportswomen has generated ongoing and widespread interest. The vision of sport as a male space and women as outsiders is

perpetuated by the mass media, in terms of both quantity and quality of coverage. Bruce (2008, p. 57) notes that the sports media 'can simultaneously challenge and reinforce dominant assumptions that sport is primarily a male domain'. However, there is evidence of change. Biscomb and Griggs (2013) documented a shift towards a greater awareness of, and coverage of, women athletes in the sports media. Later, Pettyand Pope (2019) highlight a removal of the gender marking of women's sport, with the media reporting on sport (in this case, football) *as sport.* In advancing these debates, both Matz and Bowes, and Antunovic and colleagues, consider the role of the sport media, albeit in two different US contexts: professional golf and women's American football.

Technological advancements have led to a new media landscape in sport, with athletes and sport organisations using social media sites to engage and interact with fans. Sheffer and Schultz (2013) highlight that the growth in social media has had a significant impact on the way sports are created, delivered and consumed. Allison (2018, p. 215) specifically describes the role that social media can play for emerging professional women's sports, most notably as a potential marketing tool but also as a 'free way of circumventing mainstream media outlets to communicate with and expand the fan base'.

Several commentators have outlined the potential for digital media, such as social networking sites and online blogs, to challenge dominant, often problematic, media representations of women athletes (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). In a context where traditional media outlets have been criticised for ignoring or trivialising women athletes, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) indicate that social media is a potential tool for women athletes to redress this lack of coverage. Twitter is considered the most influential social-media platform in sport (Gibbs & Haynes, 2016), and Serena Williams is one of the most popular female athletes in terms of followers. Hannah Thompson-Radford and Michael Skey present a discussion on media coverage and social media engagement with Williams, highlighting maternity as a central and significant issue for women involved in professional sport, intersected with broader discussions around gender and race.

Sanderson et al. (2016) suggest that Twitter has the potential to become the catalyst for advocacy in women's sport and the venue for it to occur. However, while LaVoi and Calhoun (2014, p. 327) ask whether or not digital media could 'free female athletes from the tyranny of traditional media', they conclude that it does not always provide a platform to contest the status quo of gender narratives in sport. Visibility on social media sites can also leave athletes open to discrimination and abuse; Jaquelyn Osborne and colleagues critically consider the rise of the female '@thlete' in online spaces, demonstrating the more problematic issues at play for professional sportswomen operating in this mediated space.

Women at Work: Professionalisation, Professional Athletes and Professionalism in Women's Sport

Alongside advances in women's involvement in sport, there has been an upsurge in women's labour force participation over the last 50 years (Juhn & Potter, 2006).

Moreover, women are making inroads into atypical employment opportunities (Hakim, 2000; Williams, 2004), challenging the traditional male and female expectations of what constitutes work (Watts, 2007). Despite this progress, women are still absent in many areas of work, perhaps most notably sport (Culvin, 2019). Women who choose a career in sport face considerable challenges, not least on the basis of legitimacy and credibility, but also financially. As Flake et al. (2013) highlight, the last half century has seen new opportunities and organisations for women in a wide range of sports, but typically most women athletes have not been paid to take part in sport. However, but there is an increasing shift towards women's sports organisations, particularly in economically developed countries, in defying this trend.

At this juncture, it is necessary to outline important terms that will be used throughout this book, specifically around the *professionalisation of women's sport*, *professional athletes* and professionalism. First, following Dowling et al. (2014), the concept of professionalisation has enjoyed a continued and popular usage, yet its precise definition, the unit of analysis employed, and the exact manner by which the concept is operationalised are often ambiguous or unclear. For Dowling et al. (2014), professionalisation is understood to be the process through which occupations change to obtain professional status. Importantly, professions are a kind of occupation and the universal activity of an occupation is work; thus, the foundation of profession as a model is work and having the knowledge, skills and capabilities to perform it (Friedson, 1990). In contrast, others have adopted the term professionalisation to refer more specifically to the transition from an amateur, volunteer-driven sector towards a more business-like approach (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). We think both conceptions have significance here. In further considering the term, Forsdike et al. (2019, p. 483) propose that professionalisation is 'seen through increasingly formalised policies and regulations, and the establishment of commercial type practices such as formalised boards to run clubs'.

Writing exclusively about men's sport, as 'sport', Gerrard (1999) describes the origins of professional team sports as embedded in the community-based activities seen in the United Kingdom in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Shifting social contexts, following industrialisation and urbanisation, led to the creation of a British urbanised working class – and with it came the development of codified, organised sport watched by spectators. For Gerrard (1999, p. 274):

> Professionalisation marked the first stage in the commoditisation of team sports. Professionalisation implied the extension of the social relations of production of sports events. Players were bound by labour contracts to team owners. Players became dependent on selling their playing services to earn a living.

The professionalisation of women's sport is notably different to this process, predominantly due to the restrictive gender roles of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and the stuttering histories of women's involvement in organised sport. This has included a history of disregard, or lack of respect, towards women as