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*Photo credits to: Jingyi Xu*
The Women, Law and Leadership class, led by Grace and Robert, has decided to focus its attention on putting women back in the game ahead of the Olympics 2024 and just in time to join the “Sporting Chance” Forum 2023 on the future of sports and human rights. To be convened in early December to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, SCF 23 will make pledges that will help shape the future of sport. Our critical discourse in the class advances the goals of General Recommendation 40 of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on women’s leadership on and off the field. Fifty years after Title IX, the landmark gender equity law passed as part of the Education Amendments of 1972, few women, especially women of color lead in sports and sports and the law. Even though women like Christine Lagarde, the first woman head of IMF attributes her leadership skills to the games she played as a young athlete, women’s leadership in sports remains an elusive target. In fact, in the US, our frequent class speaker, Megha Parekh, is the only woman of color to be head of law of an NFL sports team.

In all our civilizations, in our fables, and our myths, games are built on a foundation of fairness, albeit male rules of fairness. In real life, structural inequalities, and discrimination in accessing sport facilities, training, and sports programs, exclusions facilitated by gender and body stereotypes or bullying and harassment of individual women or diverse women groups, plague sports. These stereotypes mimic the “Thousand Papercuts” theory and the concept of "Becoming Gentlemen" that we critique in our course.

At the same time, the notion of fair play is inextricably interlinked to the practice of sport. Sports provide the litmus test to societal gender equality and in many countries, sports remain the last frontier of gender equality in public life.

"Putting Women Back in the Game" critically illustrates a range of issues from sexual harassment in sports, to body image, to family leave policies, to misogyny in e-sports, to gendered uniforms, to gender bias in media profiles of athletes, to the compounded nature of intersectional bias, to Islam’s support of women’s physical development as a way to address bans on women’s sports in certain communities. These are deeply self-reflective pieces from young leaders in the law who examine sports as a metaphor for structurally entrenched gender norms in all areas, both in and outside the playing field. In the final analysis, the playing field is an important platform for leadership in gender equality.

This report celebrates women like the young Afghan girls, Azeera, Shaheeda and Hanifa (names have been changed) who continue to skate in a country where women’s and girls' sports are prohibited through edict, and the Iranian female athletes who are denied the freedom to travel to compete in sporting events. These women and girls are using sports as a platform to fight for their fundamental human rights and dignity and to equalize the playing field for all.
For both of us, sports have been a major cornerstone of our upbringings, something that has been there for us at all times and something we could count on. It was therefore a no-brainer for both of us to get involved with the Entertainment and Sports Law Society here at Penn Law, serving as the president and 1L Recruitment Chair and Lead Editor, respectively, as we constantly work to cultivate a sense of community for those interested in the intersection of sports and entertainment and the law. And after just one single class of “Women, Law, and Leadership”, Professor de Silva de Alwis asked both of us to spearhead the class report, centering around the issues permeating women’s sports. Therefore, after dedicating a substantial part of both of our lives to watching and playing sports, we decided to make “Putting Women Back in the Game” the Class Report for 2023, a report we hope not only combines the contributions of our intelligent classmates, but for the next generation of leaders, in an effort to promote change and build toward a better future for women in sports.

In this Report, we divided class contributions into the categories Harassment and Inequality, Media Bias, Across the Globe, Personal Anecdotes, and finally, Sports and Leadership in Action. The Report concludes with a “Looking Forward and Executive Summary.”
Harassment and inequality have been two of the main issues that women of the past century have focused on with the hopes that they no longer exist in the future. But while inequality and harassment have been properly stunted in certain industries, they have only grown more prominent in women’s sports. In a 2020 study done by The German Olympic and Paralympic Committee, they conducted that 54.2% of athletes, out of 1,529 elite athletes, had been victims of sexual abuse during their lives, while 48% of the victims were abused in and out of their respective sports.[1] The issue continues to be prevalent in sports because many institutions, whether it be on the collegiate level or professional, have turned a blind eye and been late to implementing policies to deter such behavior and protect its athletes. And, athletes have been extremely reluctant to report the sexual harassment: “For years, athletes said, they risked retaliation and career damage when they dared to report specific instances of misconduct”. [2] Women cannot be “put back in the game” if they are being left stranded and ignored on the sidelines, sexually harassed, with no recourse in sight to help them through dark times, victimized by their own coaches. Sexual harassment, and the discomfort and disgust that comes with it, have infiltrated women’s sports, a significant problem that has only grown more intense throughout the years. In 2021, Quentin Hillsman, coach of the Syracuse women’s basketball, was accused of abuse and unwanted physical contact by nine former players and 19 former staffers or managers, and it resulted in a large number of players requesting to transfer to other universities.[3] Three of these players, for example, said Hillsman kissed them on their foreheads after they spoke about their minutes on the court, while on accused him of physically grabbing her pelvic region and downplaying the incident as a joke.[4] When players of the Syracuse team were being sexually harassed by Hillsman and reported it to the school, no actions were immediately taken; players stated that they notified the school and listed out all the complaints and allegations in an online questionnaire provided by a Syracuse administrator, but no one from Syracuse ever called her back, while another teammate also was left stranded on a Zoom call scheduled with school administrators.[5]
And, the harassment is not limited to just sexual harassment in the form of physical conduct. For example, last year, a bombshell report was released, commissioned by U.S. Soccer and conducted by an all-female team of investigators, including former U.S. Deputy Atty. Gen. Sally Q. Yates, which discussed the actions of specific male coaches in women’s soccer who sexually harassed their players.[6] The report discussed Paul Riley, one of the coaches, who consistently abused the players verbally and emotionally, calling them “dumb, stupid, slow, idiotic, retarded”, telling them they “have no balls” and “will never be better than the average 16-year-old boy,” among many other comments, which destroyed many of the players emotionally and psychologically.[7] But this incident, while majorly publicized as a bombshell report, and correctly justified in the firing of all of the named coaches, is only a glimpse behind the curtains of what female athletes have endured.

Female athletes have endured harassment and abuse from their coaches, doctors, and more broadly, societal expectations. This issue has been continuing even more just this year, a sign that even alongside the rise of the Me Too movement, and with more calls for women’s rights and equality, there has been marginal improvement at best, if any at all, in the prevention of sexual harassment of women in sports. Even during many women’s brightest moments, sexual harassment remains extremely pervasive. For example, on full display this past year and on national televisions worldwide, after Spain beat England 1-0 in the World Cup final, Luis Rubiales, president of the Spanish football federation, kissed forward Jenni Hermoso on the lips, and Hermoso said on a live stream afterwards that she “didn’t like it”. [8] It was a disgusting act of blatant sexual harassment, one that was seen around the world and exemplifies the horrors women go through in sports on an everyday basis. The day after that moment, Irnee Montero, the Minister of Equality in Spain, described the horrors behind sexual harassment and how it was such a horrific moment, one that occurs way more often than just that national stage moment. She went on Twitter to say it was “a form of sexual violence that we women suffer on a daily basis and until now has been invisible....We can’t normalise this”. [9] And the only way to ensure it is not normalized is to actually spring to action. There are countless coaches, managers, and leaders across sports engaging in these horrific acts towards their players, and the consequences need to be severe and the stories brought to life.
Another terrifying story this year broke headlines in late September of 2023 when the Michigan State Football Team suspended its newly-extended head coach, Mel Tucker, after a horrifying report was released that he sexually harassed activist and rape survivor Brenda Tracy last year.[10] Tracy said she became friends with Tucker over her work as an advocate for rape victims, but that relationship became sour in April 2022, when Tucker masturbated while on a phone call with her, and Tucker had continued to deny the allegations, saying it was consensual and intimate. Tucker, Rubiales, Hillsman, and Riley are just a few examples on a list that is much longer. Athletes should be able to train for their sports and have control over their own successes, and without accountability or any enhanced measures to protect women, the sexual harassment issue will only become worse and it will have a detrimental impact not only on current female athletes, but on the next generations to come.

Women show up to play sports and are playing offense against both opponents on the field and opponents on the sidelines in the form of their coaches, an uphill battle that still needs to be addressed in drastic ways. Women train their entire lives, dedicating countless months and years to perfecting their craft, just like their male counterparts, to make it to the highest level of their respective sports. The barriers men face when they try to achieve greatness typically involve propensity to injuries or a competitive roster that limits playing time. Women, however, are unjustly and evidently facing a larger barrier: the lack of attention to serious, prevalent sexual harassment.

Even women who avoid sexual harassment through their sports face uphill battles in their sports through constant perpetuated inequalities. Whether it be through smaller locker rooms, lack of financial resources to fund their teams, lack of media coverage, or even pay in general, women are constantly left on an unequal playing field to their male athlete counterparts. The inequalities are specifically showcased through horrible, visual acts, like Rubialies’ kiss after the championship, but there are countless other inequalities female athletes face on an everyday basis that make their success on the highest level even more challenging to achieve.
In 2022, the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT) secured equal pay after a six year battle in the courts and almost forty years of existence. Despite USWNT having more success than their male counterparts and earning more money for the U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) than the men’s team, they received significantly less pay, had subpar playing conditions, and received worse accommodations and training. Because of the low wages they received, women were forced to either quit soccer, work other jobs in addition to playing, or live off of the low and, at times, nonexistent wages made from the sport. They were also more exposed to injury from the often poor conditions of play.

While pay was at the forefront of USWNT’s legal battle, it was not at the heart of the fight. The differential treatment between men and women drove them to engage in litigation and public opinion campaigns for change. The athletes were in a fight for equality, not just for themselves, but for women in every other arena as well.

The challenges women face in the arena of sports serves as a useful metaphor for the challenges that women face in countless other spheres of life. In the medical field, female surgical residents are given less autonomy, leading to worsened career readiness. In the legal field, only about one third of federal judges identify as female, which places men at the helm of important decisions about the law more often.

Female students in elementary school fall behind their male peers in test scores despite starting in similar positions, which is thought to stem from differential treatment from teachers. Incarcerated women are 30 times more likely to be raped than free women and are largely supervised by male employees, making them vulnerable to further abuse. And these statistics get much worse for women of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and other people with intersectional identities.

Unlike the discrimination the USWNT experienced, most discrimination women face does not get thrust into the public eye. Most discrimination stays behind closed doors, in the sphere it exists in. When it does get reported, women face another battle—the battle to get others to believe their stories.

All hope is not lost, however. As the USWNT has shown us, with persistence, women persevere and create change that improves the experiences of future generations. Change is possible and the next generation will be better than the last because of fearless female leaders, like those at Penn Carey Law, who don’t accept the status quo.

-Melissa Bredbenner
A VISUAL REPRESENTATION

This picture speaks a lot

Struggle of a woman to reach her goal.

Comic sourced by Catherine Zhang
IN COACHING  -- Allison Kuntsler

Three coaches, three men who tore down the wall of trust instilled within the coach-athlete relationship; yet the experiences women have endured at the hands of their own coaches extend far beyond these.

Report: Former U.S. Snowboard Coach Peter Foley Accused of Sexual Assault

Peter Foley: Three former athletes and a former employee filed reports against the U.S. Ski and Snowboard coach, describing the sexual assault and harassment they endured by Foley.

NWSL Coach Paul Riley Fired After Accusations of Sexual Coercion by Former Players

Paul Riley: Numerous former players came forward to accuse the Portland Thorns and North Carolina Courage coach of sexual coercion.

Spain's ex-FA chief Rubiales gets three-year ban over kiss scandal

Luis Rubiales: The former president of the Spanish Football Federation was accused of non-consensually kissing his player after Spain’s World Cup win.
In an article for the New York Times, Vanessa Friedman argues that female athletes advocating for uniform equity are at the forefront of the against controlling women's bodies. She explains how male-dominated companies designed uniforms in women's sports for men--highly sexualized for the male gaze or ill-fitting versions of men's styles. For example, when the Olympic Games first included the women's marathon in 1984, expressively feminine uniforms soothed fears that allowing women to participate in sports would make them too masculine.

In addition, making female uniforms more formfitting or exposing more skin has been suggested to increase viewership of women's sports, including by Sepp Blatter, a former president of FIFA. Athletes across all sports have rebelled against male control over female bodies. In the 2021 Olympics, German gymnasts competed in a full-length unitard, not a traditional leotard. To recognize the realities of menstruation, tennis players wore black shorts under their mandated white tennis dresses at Wimbledon, and soccer athletes pushed back against all-white uniforms. Track and field stars like Allyson Felix have launched their female-tailored brands in direct competition with large, mostly male-dominated, activewear companies.
“Prove-It-Again bias refers to the necessity for women to prove themselves again and again across the career. Due to negative gender and racial stereotypes about competence and work commitment, women and people of color are often assumed to lack the competence and commitment to sustain a successful professional career. To overcome these assumptions, women and people of color often perceive that they must go above and beyond to demonstrate their fitness and belonging.”

When Serena Williams gave birth to her first daughter Olympia in 2017, she was already an icon in every sense of the word. Still, there were conversations about how having a child would impact her performance. Williams was open about the fact that her pregnancy had not been without complications and even shared that she almost died during childbirth. She was bedridden for six weeks after the arrival of her daughter. Three months after giving birth, Williams was back on the court. “Knowing that I have won 23 Grand Slam titles and several other titles, I don’t think I have anything more left to prove... But I am not done yet” she said soon after her return. Despite her commentary that she had nothing left to prove, the anticipation from others was clear. Dozens of articles were published about her first match post birth and even more followed when she won her first grand slam title post birth. For the media there was something heroic about her return to dominance after such a difficult experience. Akin to a male athlete returning to the sport after a major injury, there was a hope and in some cases a skepticism about whether she could ‘prove it again’.

Similar questions swirled around Allyson Felix, although media coverage around her pregnancy and return to the sport are more sparse. Like Serena, and many other Black women nationwide, Allyson Felix’s childbirth experience was life-threatening. Throughout her pregnancy Felix has always planned to “return to the track and add to her record-setting medal haul.” But her birthing experience and emergency C-section left her wondering whether a return to the sport would be possible.
Less than three years later she would appear in the Tokyo Olympics and become the most decorated woman in Olympic track and field history. She had proved it again. The time and energy spent lamenting on whether these stars would get back to the top of their game could have been spent in more meaningful and impactful ways.

Both women were vocal about the challenges they faced becoming mothers. Serena Williams spoke openly about the fact that her medical providers did not take her concerns seriously. It was her self advocacy that saved her life. The same is true for many Black women with less money, power, notoriety, and star power than Serena. Allyson Felix experienced physical complications but also shared openly about her fear of retaliation from Nike if they found out she was pregnant. Taking a large pay cut or losing her endorsement completely could come as a result of her decision to start a family.

By focusing on women athletes ‘returning to the top of their game’ we often gloss over the hurdles they have to clear in order to do that. If someone like Serena Williams faces such immense challenges, what of the average woman given birth in smalltown hospital? Their experiences provide a unique opportunity to have a national conversation and reckon with the lack of support for all women following childbirth. It is possible that addressing the issues they have raised could yield positive results for all women and all industries. But our focus on the sport and their return to it strips away layers of their humanity and reduces their challenges to a blip in their professional careers.

It is harmful to scrutinize every race or every match post birth without also acknowledging the many ways that society continues to fail these women, whether it is medical professionals or corporate executives who fail to see their worth. Society pushes women to get back into the game without regard for how their mental or physical health may suffer. But Allyson Felix and Serena Williams have demonstrated what it looks like to care for yourself and get back to the game on your own terms.

The next generation of athletes including stars like Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka benefit from Serena and Allyson’s candor, vulnerability, and their showing that you only have to prove what you want to. And you can do it on your own terms and in your own time.
The Burdens of Body Fat Percentage and Body Image for Female Athletes

Katelyn Ohashi was only 12 years old when she became an elite gymnast, and only 14 years old when she started to confront increasingly intrusive comments about her weight and appearance: “you look like a pig”; “you look like you swallowed an elephant”; “you remind me of a bird that’s too big to fly. These words were uttered to her by the very “people whose opinions [she] valued.” Even on days where Katelyn and her friends would train for hours, they would attempt to restrict their caloric intake to 500 calories, and they would purge food when necessary. Instead of working with nutritionists to help the girls navigate their dietary needs, coaches instructed them to skip dinner and turned a blind eye when the girls were weak due to lack of energy.

Like Katelyn, Abigail Stultz entered the world of competitive track and field at a young age, eventually becoming a two-time high school Maryland state champion in outdoor and indoor high jump. When Stultz’ first body composition test at Penn State returned a result of around 20% body fat, a school dietician said 20% was within an “ideal range,” but her coach insisted it should be lower. Stultz consequently “teeter[ed] between restricting food intake and binge eating” throughout college. At one point, she had stopped menstruating for over a year due to the severe dieting in efforts to lower her body fat percentage. For women, especially those who have considered getting pregnant in the future, losing one’s period due to extreme exercise and weight loss can be unfathomably frightening (and in the worst case, irreversible)—and yet, according to one of Stultz’s teammates, many girls have “been brainwashed into thinking...that it is good for you to lose your period and it is good for you to have that feeling of hunger in your stomach.”

We cannot completely scrap the rules—sports at the elite competition level, by nature, are about achieving results. But in striving to achieve the best results, we cannot reduce female athletes to mere numbers, percentages, and sizes. The unforgiving emphasis on outward metrics, many of which are not tailored to the idiosyncrasies and unique needs of each body, has bred unforgiving mental and physical health issues. For female athletes to continue to join the ranks of leaders in sports worldwide, our understanding of physical health and fitness must decenter rigid metrics like body fat percentage and instead embrace other vital measures of health, including sleep, mental well-being, and a balanced nutrition.
Motherhood should not be disqualifying in professional sports, as it should not be for any other profession. The maternity leave landscape in women’s sports has only recently begun to improve. Players in the two largest professional women’s sports leagues in the United States — the WNBA and National Women’s Soccer League — successfully negotiated paid maternity leave into their Collective Bargaining Agreements in the past few years. Companies in more sponsor-dominated sports such as track and field have responded to public demands by their athletes — notably, professional runner Alyson Felix — and created maternity leave policies for their athletes as well. But even with paid leave policies, there remains much room for improvement, including by providing maternity leave for players who haven’t given birth and offering more resources to new moms.

But in the interest of “putting women back in the game,” parental leave should go beyond maternity leave and include fathers. The only professional men’s league to have a paternity leave policy is the MLB — baseball players get three days of paternity leave, and even in the past 10 years they’ve been ridiculed for taking it. While that attitude has been improving, other professional sports leagues haven’t followed suit. If a professional athlete’s partner gives birth during the season, the expectation if they are not in the MLB is that they will continue to show up for practices and games. While that undoubtedly impacts those players’ ability to bond with their children, the expectation that men take no time off when their children are born also reinforces preconceived notions about children, care work, and gender dynamics in relationships.

Normalizing paternity leave improves gender equality in a variety of ways. First, it establishes from the outset of a child’s life that both parents are responsible for the care of the child — not just the parent who gave birth. It also helps women recover post-birth, and it helps mitigate the career penalty that women receive for taking time off. All of this contributes to an environment in which motherhood does not preclude women from career advancement. As a cultural institution, pro sports teams and athletes should use their platforms to say that parenting and care work is for all parents — not just the responsibility of mothers. Macho, high-profile male athletes taking time off to care for their children might be enough to encourage other men to do the same.
IN E-SPORTS

-- Mengquan Zheng

Young as e-sport might be, there are still many stereotypical bias against female in the video playing industry. Many people believe that women are either worse in esports or worse than men at competitive games. However, in Devin Nash’s vlog, after looking through researches about woman and men in gaming, he concluded that “I’ve dug into this and spent a bunch of hours researching this stuff, and as far as we know, there’s quite a bit of evidence that says that women perform as well as men in video games. But we need to be fair, right? Let’s go look at the studies that showed that they’re worse in video games. Oh, there aren’t any. There’s literally none. I couldn’t find a single one. I looked everywhere and I couldn’t find any studies that showed that women are worse in video games.”

Despite no evidence concluding that women are worse in video games, professional female players suffer more difficulties in this career. While there are plenty of successful female gaming influencers, very few women make it into the upper echelons of competitive gaming. They are difficult to get serious training because people tend not to treat them seriously. And perhaps most importantly, female pro gamers earn significantly less than male gamers.[2] According to the BBC, only 0.002% (US$6,300) of the US$235 million awarded in Dota 2 has been won by women.[3] It turns out that women are discouraged from joining this profession for exactly the same reason they are discouraged from other sports – low income, stereotypical discrimination, and the lack of training because of the above two reasons.
Unfortunately, advocating for parity with the men’s game as a general rule to strive for gender equality has manifested in implacably equal setups and rules – women compete on a field of equal dimensions using the same-sized ball and adhering to identical rules as men. Some might contend that women’s soccer can be treated with the same prestige and respect as its male counterpart only if the game applies identical rules to both categories so as not to perpetuate the idea that physiological differences imply inferiority. Strict conformity here hence can be seen as a reflection of the principles of fairness and equality.

However, others might argue that such a superficial and overly rigid form of ‘equality’ is, in fact, hurting women athletes physically. Numerous studies have shown that women tend to sustain more injuries compared to men when playing under the same rules. A 2018 study by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine shows that regions of damaged brain tissue were five times more extensive in female soccer players than in males when using the same kind of soccer ball.[2] Moreover, it does not help that the lack of soccer boots designed for women taking into account the fact women's feet, heels and arches are shaped differently is contributing to significantly more knee injuries.

Equal doesn’t necessarily mean the same. It means have the same window of opportunity to succeed.
Tennis player Pam Shriver told her story about the sex discrimination she faced in the early years of her career by her male coach. Essentially, there is systemic sexism inherent in women’s tennis that contributes to vast discrimination and abuse.
In September 2016, The Indianapolis Star exposed USA Gymnastics national team doctor Larry Nassar for sexually molesting minors. He was charged with sexually assaulting hundreds of women and children over the 18 years he had worked with the team, and was sentenced to de facto life imprisonment. As a non-athlete, gymnastics is one of the two sports I sometimes watch (the other being figure skating), and to be honest, I am not surprised by the egregiousness of Nassar’s behavior.

As one of the few sports in which female athletes often garner more attention than their male counterparts, gymnastics can be especially compromising for female athletes for several reasons. The first is their young age. Gymnasts historically tend to compete in their teenage years, retiring in their early twenties. An NBCSports article notes that the 2020 Tokyo Olympics was the first time since 1968 with “more non-teens than teens competing.” The young age of competitors and children’s faith in adults, especially doctors, can make it difficult for them to speak out when facing sexual harassment.

Another factor is the cultural stigma that can attach to the sport’s emphasis on the body (especially the female body) and lighter dress code. During the Larry Nassar scandal, three-time Olympic gold medalist Gabby Douglas responded to her teammate’s accusation by tweeting “however[sic] it is our responsibility as women to dress modestly and be classy. dressing[sic] in a provocative/ sexual way entices the wrong crowd.” If one female gymnast holds such values, others can easily hear similar or even more outrageous sentiments and blame themselves when facing harassment.

But the institutional protection of powerful men is perhaps the most salient reason behind one man’s ability to assault hundreds of women. In 2016, USAG entered into a $1.25million settlement with Olympics gold medalist McKayla Maroney that included a non-disclosure agreement. After investigating Nassar’s behavior, leaders of USAG still allowed him to quietly retire and failed to notify the police.
Even parents are sometimes hesitant to flag abuse, as evident in the case of Qi Han, a top North Carolinian gymnastics coach who has been placed under restrictions for emotionally abusing athletes and who for years had gotten away with this behavior because parents were worried that the children would otherwise be unable to obtain gymnastics college scholarships. The overwhelming institutional failure by adults, organizations, and government agencies to protect often underaged athletes is mortifying.

I do not believe the high rate of sexual and emotional abuse in gymnastics, a traditionally female sport, is coincidental. It pains me that, while the most popular sports are already male-dominated, women are so at risk in one of the few fields in which they take the lead. While we often compare ways in which women are pushed out of the sports field in sports such as basketball and ice hockey, we can forget that even in female dominated sports, they can be just as vulnerable and exploited.
How Spain’s Kissing Controversy Highlights Systemic Sexual Abuse Against Female Athletes and the Way the Public and Institutional Reactions Display Our Steps Forward

On August 20th, 2023, Spain’s soccer team won the Women’s World Cup in what should have been a purely joyous and momentous occasion for the women’s team who had previously failed to make it past Round 16 of the event.[1] However, this triumph by the women’s team has been completely overshadowed by another glaring example of the systemic sexual and emotional abuse faced by female athletes at the hands of the people in power. Luis Rubiales, the president of the Spanish Soccer Federation (“RFEF”), grabbed Jennifer Hermoso, one of the players on the winning women’s soccer team, by the head and kissed her on the lips without her consent while presenting her with her medal.[2]

The public’s reaction to this event was immediate and widespread, sparking a whirlwind media frenzy covering the issue. Hermoso’s initial reaction was to tell her teammates that she didn’t like the encounter according to locker room footage, but then RFEF released a statement in which Hermoso downplayed Rubiales’ actions.[3] Hermoso claims, however, that the federation had coerced her into making this statement by threatening legal action if she did not completely agree to Rubiales’s version of events, a claim the federation still denies. Rubiales himself claims that the kiss was “mutual and with the consent” of Hermoso, stating that it was a celebratory gesture in line with how he would kiss his daughters.[4] He then proceeded to call critics “idiots, losers, and dickheads” but then apologized as public backlash continued to grow.[5] Regardless of this apology, Rubiales, nonetheless, refused to step down from his position declaring, “I won’t resign,” four times in quick succession during a speech at the federation’s general assembly, during which he claimed he was the victim of a witch hunt by “false feminists.”[6] During the course of this speech and afterwards, Rubiales was applauded by the overwhelmingly male assembly.[7] After the assembly, eleven coaching and technical staff who worked for the Spanish federation claimed in a joint statement that various female staff members were obliged, against their wishes, to sit in the front row, to give the image that they supported Rubiales’s statements and actions.[8]
The Spanish soccer federation initially stood in support of Rubiales, and the women’s national soccer team coach, Jorge Vilda, as well as the men’s national soccer team’s coach Luis de la Fuente initially stood in support of Rubiales’s actions as well. However, more than 80 Spanish soccer players came out in support of Hermoso, male and female, and signed their names on a statement stating that they would not return to their national team if the current leaders in the RFEF did not resign. And where the RFEF failed to hold Rubiales accountable, other organizations and institutions have picked up their slack. After the incident, FIFA, the international governing body of association football (soccer), opened disciplinary proceedings against Rubiales, suspending him for ninety days while the disciplinary investigation was taking place, and on October 30th, FIFA’s Disciplinary Committee issued the decision that Rubiales “would be banned from all football-related activities at the national and international levels for three years for breaching the organization’s disciplinary code by his actions after the final on August 20th.”

On top of this, Rubiales is now facing at least three legal and administrative challenges, with the Spanish High Court’s prosecutor planning to contact Hermoso about a possible criminal complaint for sexual aggression. Notably, Spain made changes to its laws on sexual assault last year, and under what’s now known as Spain’s “Only Yes Is Yes” law, a non-consensual kiss can be considered sexual assault of which Rubiales could face a fine or a prison sentence of one to four years. Due to this suspension and in light of the legal proceedings, Rubiales has finally submitted his resignation from his position as chief of the Spanish football association as well as his position as the vice predicant of the Union of European Football Associations (“UEFA”). The RFEF has also removed the team’s manager Jorge Vilda from his role after footage emerged of him seeming to inappropriately touch a female staff member during the Women’s World Cup Final. With this information coming to light, it is no surprise that Vilda initially applauded Rubiales when he stated that he would not resign, a position which he later retracted after witnessing the growing public outrage. On a more positive note, however, Vilda has been replaced by Montse Tomé, the first woman in Spanish national team history to hold this position.

And women’s soccer itself is no stranger to reports of rampant abuse of power in regard to incidents of sexual abuse. An investigation, titled “The Yates Report,” was commissioned by U.S. Soccer, the organization in charge of administering the sport in the U.S., to determine whether the incidents of sexual abuse against female soccer players that were brought to light by an investigatory report done by The Athletic were isolated or were an example of a much bigger issue in women’s soccer.
The Yates report concluded that sexual abuse was indeed systemic throughout women’s soccer, by specifically identifying a multitude of perpetrators and highlighting the negligence of both the U.S. Soccer Federation and the National Women’s Soccer League.[19] These organizations failed to institute basic workplace policies, effectuated poor working conditions, perpetuated a systemic culture of abuse within the league, and subsequently participated in brushing such reports of sexual abuse under the rug.[20] As discouraging as all of this information brought forward is, the report has triggered a number of official responses from U.S. Soccer, including the formation of a “Participant Safety Taskforce” which is charged with ensuring athlete protection against sexual abuse.[21]

This type of systemic sexual abuse is unfortunately all too common within the field of women’s sports, and it is typically facilitated by the types of relationships men in power in sports organizations are able to have with female athletes. A 2021 study into the coach-athlete relationship found that a “typical characteristic of perpetrators is that they have power and influence over their victims.”[22] Another study found that the coach’s power comes from the “closeness of the relationship, the legitimate authority of the coach, the coach’s expertise and previous successes, and the coach’s ability to control access to the athletes.”[23] When coaches or other high ranking members of sports institutions have power over something incredibly important to players, in this case whether one’s time is spent on or off the field, these men can then potentially leverage that power imbalance to facilitate sexual abuse.[24] It is also important to note that coaches often have fostered a close, trust-based relationship between themselves and their female athletes from a very young age which provides those with ill intentions ample opportunity to groom their athletes.[25] The act of grooming is defined as the act of establishing a close relationship with a child to prepare them for sexual abuse later on.[26] Applying this definition to the context of the relationships adult coaches often foster with their minor athletes, it is easy to see how these situations are ripe with the opportunity for sexual abuse to arise if proper precautionary measures are not put into place.

The World Cup kissing incident is only one of many examples showcasing the sexual abuse that runs rampant in sports, particularly against female athletes. This event comes only a few years after a massive sex abuse scandal was brought to light in women’s gymnastics.[27] There, USA Gymnastics’ Dr. Larry Nassar was employed by the organization for decades, and he used his reputation to groom and sexually abuse hundreds, and possibly thousands, of victims, some of which were Olympian athletes, and most of which were minors.[28] And when complaints were made about him, as the story has gone many times before, they were ignored.[29]
Nassar’s victims included some of the most famous gymnasts to date, including Simone Biles and McKayla Maroney, and his victims were required by USA Gymnastics to submit to mandatory “pelvic exams” given to them by this man in their hotel or dorm beds completely unsupervised.[30] One might wonder how such widespread abuse could continue on for so many years, but USA Gymnastics and the US Olympic Committee, not wanting to scare off sponsors or risk the medals they had previously won, covered up the abuse.[31] They did so for so many years that they had become implicated to the point that they needed to continue to cover up the abuse in order to protect themselves from criminal and civil liability.[32] Nassar’s trial in 2018 demonstrated the overall mentality in sports that values the protection of medals, male coaches, male doctors, and men in positions in power over the female athletes that brought them those medals in the first place.[33]

This immediate protection of the men in power over the female athletes who had been victimized by these men was also the stance the RFEF initially took when the kiss controversy first erupted after the 2023 Women’s World Cup.[34] However, the immense public backlash, the support from male and female sports players across the globe, and the accountability actions taken by both FIFA as well as the Spanish legal system, shows that there is a changing tide. While these institutions are still very much embroiled in their habits of the past that allows for the sexual abuse of their female athletes to take place, they are now facing intense resistance from the public and are experiencing consequences from organizations who will no longer tolerate this culture of sexism and sexual abuse. Now, as with the #MeToo movement that gained momentum in 2017, it is possible that other women, seeing the public support that these female athletes are receiving and the punishment of their abusers, with Nassar receiving 175 years in prison and Rubiales being forced to resign from all of his positions involving Soccer and possibly facing legal repercussions, will hopefully now be more comfortable coming out with their own stories of abuse in the sports industry.[35]

The prevalence of sexual abuse within the sports industry against women will continue to hinder women in their careers, if not preventing them completely from starting in the first place. The first step of addressing this issue is showing that when women do choose to come out with their stories, the men who have abused their power in this way actually face consequences. We can still see how organizations have the first instinct to protect “their own,” but the public backlash and organizational acknowledgement of the kiss controversy in Spain, other examples of men who have abused their power beginning to face genuine repercussions, and investigative research being done on this topic into these different sports organizations shows significant progress toward justice and security. I believe that, with time, progress will continue to be made in a way that will make sports a safer place for our girls and women to participate.
In 1967 Katherine Switzer was the first woman to complete the Boston Marathon as an official entrant. She registered under the name K.V. Switzer to obscure her gender. While at least one other woman had previously run the marathon and evaded detection by not registering and hiding her identity as a woman through clothing, Katherine proudly pinned her bib number to her chest. After just a few miles into the race, the race director, who did not know she had registered, physically attacked her and tried to remove her from the race. Katherine, staving off the director with assistance from her boyfriend, continued to finish the marathon, and has been championing the empowerment of women through running since.

The Boston Marathon is the world’s oldest marathon; it began in 1897. Yet, it would not be until 1972, when Title IX was passed, that women would be officially invited to register. That year, 9 women out of 1219 total entrants registered for the marathon. Growing up in Boston, the spirit of the marathon and the strength and heart of the runners and their supporters is difficult to describe. Since I was around five years old, I remember going to watch my mom run the marathon. When I was in high school, I ran the last 6 miles of the marathon with her. The next year, when my mom called me from the finish line right after the bombings, where several of my cross-country teammates were injured, the importance of the marathon seemed greater than ever. We owe it to the women who ran before us that we can be a part of it all.

In 2022, 12,155 women, just over 42% of the total entrants, registered for the Boston Marathon. Yet, while the sport has opened up tremendously to women’s participation, before they get to the start line, women runners face particular obstacles in training that men do not. These obstacles were brought into the light following the death of runner Eliza Fletcher, who was abducted while out on an early morning run and later found dead. Adidas surveyed 9,000 runners from nine different countries and found that “92% of women reported feeling concerned for their safety, with half (51%) afraid of being physically attacked, compared to 28% of men. Additionally, the survey revealed that 38% of women have experienced physical or verbal harassment while running...” Melissa Sullivan wrote about her experience after running the Marine Corps Marathon. She describes how “Conquering those grueling 26.2 miles was exhilarating. I felt strong. I felt confident. I felt empowered. Until I went on a run a few days later....My runner’s high was obliterated by the cold, sober reality of being a woman in this sport: Any sense of strength, confidence and power generated by running is fleeting. The bleak truth is that violence finds us despite our best efforts to prevent it.”
Violence against women runners is connected to other forms of violence against women. While much of the harassment that women runners face is sexual, as Vicki Schultz theorizes, it is an expression of sexism, not sexuality or sexual desire. Shultz describes how harassment ought to include “not only unwanted sexual advances but also a wide range of other sexist, demeaning behaviors aimed at women and others who threaten settled gender norms.” Thus, “[h]arassment is linked to broader forms of sex discrimination and inequality,” Harassment of women runners can also be seen through the idea of “a thousand papercuts.” These thousand paper cuts are not just the instances of harassment women face on runs outside, but the many actions they take to attempt to prevent harassment that male counterparts do not to.

When Eliza Fletcher was murdered, many commentators were quick to blame her. Why was she running so early in the morning? What was she wearing? Why was she alone? Women wear their hair in buns instead of ponytails because they could be less easily grabbed, notify friends or family of their routes and what they are wearing, run without both earbuds in, constantly survey their surroundings, change their routes, run on the treadmill instead of outside when it isn’t light out, run with others instead of alone, and do not share their running routesthrough apps like Strava. As Melissa Sullivan wrote in her Op-Ed, she is angry, frustrated, and exhausted “by the expectation that the onus to prevent the harassment and intimidation of female runners is, should be and always will be on us. Not on a culture that normalizes the objectification, degradation and subjugation of women.” It is essential to call out harassment as a form of sexism designed to restrict women’s freedom that is not dependent on women’s actions, such as what they wear or when they run. To accept that women will be unsafe in public spaces or to focus on further controlling women’s actions within these spaces obscures patriarchal hegemony as the root of violence.

Women need to be free from harassment to fully be able to enjoy public spaces. Women do not have an undisputed right to occupy public space. Being free from intimidation in public spaces is linked to other rights, such as the right to protest and the right to free speech. UN Women’s flagship programme, “Safe Cities and Public Spaces,” recognizes this issue and seeks to address it. Additionally, SDG 11.7 highlights the goal of “universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities. While harassment in workplaces is recognized as a problem with policies to address it, women and girls fear and experience violence in public spaces, from harassment to rape and femicide. As UN Women has written, “It happens on streets, in and around public transportation, schools, workplaces, public toilets, water and food distribution sites, and parks.” The effects are widely felt. “It reduces [women and girls’] ability to participate in school, work, and public life. It limits their access to essential services and their enjoyment of cultural and recreational activities, and negatively impacts their health and wellbeing.”
The harassment of women runners does not just impact their experience running, but it is tied to access to leadership in other fields. As women’s rights scholar Rangita de Silva de Alwis wrote, “Women’s leadership cannot be isolated from the general status of women in society. Violence against women both in the home and in public is one of the biggest impediments to women’s agency and has enormous social, political, and economic ramifications on women and society.” In running, women feel empowered and negotiate the dangers they face in public spaces in order to feel this pleasure of running and empowerment. Author Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson describes how in running she does not feel vulnerability, but how running “generates feelings of embodied strength, power, dynamism, of being capable and ready-for-action.” For Jacquelyn and many others, the nexus of pleasure and danger is experienced at a “deeply corporeal level.”

Around the world, women’s free and safe access to public spaces must be addressed with an understanding of intersectionality and how women of overlapping identities experience running. Given how women’s bodies are the nexus of corporal agency and social constraints, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson points out how running brings to light “certain corporeal privileges as well as confronting gendered disadvantages.” In particular, disabled women face challenges using public spaces. Caroline Rodgers, a Black British runner who ran her first marathon in 1976, advocated for women to be able to join long distance races. Sabrina Pace-Humphreys, a co-founder of Black Trail Runners, described how “Caroline was an activist using running as a form of protest.”

Today, there are notable activists who use their platforms to increase the visibility and experiences of non-white runners. Jordan Daniel, the founder of Rising Hearts, an Indigenous group that combats racism through running, spoke out against the victim blaming of Eliza Fletcher. The organization TrailblazHers is an “accessible, inclusive running group where women, especially those who aren’t white, can feel safe running in their neighborhood.” The founders encourage women to find powers in numbers and facilitate group runs. Carolyn Su founded Diverse We Run, an Instagram community as a space to share stories of non-white runners. As runners experiences are intersectional, so has been the activism around women’s safety while running.

In September of this year, runners in Eliza Fletcher’s community in Memphis completed “Finish Eliza’s Run.” As one commenter noted, the event was meant to keep her memory alive by running the same route she did before she was killed, “but it also seemingly signals another message: to Keep running.”
Women runners show leadership by showing up every run to occupy public space and experience the joy and feeling of freedom that running brings. As Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson commented, “For, as resonated so strongly with my nascent feminist consciousness almost 50 years ago, the personal is indeed political – and women runners encounter politicized ‘public’ space every day.” Running serves to connect women of different backgrounds and different reasons for running. Even though running is a solo sport, runners become their best when training together. Women show up for each other, and male allies often show up for us too. Women runners showed leadership by demanding to participate, and the runners of our generation continue to show up and occupy space, building on amplifying narratives and visibility for future generations.

“Life is for participating, not for spectating” – Katherine Switzer

Katherine Switzer being cajoled by the race director in the 1967 Boston Marathon. Getty Images.
There has certainly been substantial progress throughout the years in the quest to increase viewership of women’s sports and thus help to break barriers and bridge the gender gap through coverage of sports. For example, this year’s Women’s NCAA tournament drew nearly 10 million viewers for the final game between Iowa and LSU, a 103% increase from 2022’s tournament.[1] The WNBA draft also increased its viewership by 42% between 2022 and 2023, while interest in the Women’s Super League increased 81% from 2022 to 2023.[2]

Yet, despite these promising advances, the intersection of sports and the media in connection to women’s rights has faced extraordinarily large barriers that still remain pervasive. Just as Jessica Fink pointed out, “In all sorts of workplaces, women frequently feel brushed to the side: Their ideas are undermined, their efforts are upstaged, and their contributions are ignored”. [3]

First, women journalists and sideline reports are often mistreated by male athletes or members of certain teams, further reflecting the abuse and harassment that women are privy to in their everyday lives.

For example, Mickey Callaway, the former New York Mets manager and pitching coach for the Los Angeles Angels, was accused of lewd, inappropriate behavior by five different women who work in sports media.[4] He sent inappropriate photographs, sent them unsolicited messages and regularly commented on their physical appearance in an unprofessional, inappropriate manner, and one of the individuals even accused him of thrusting his crotch near her face as she interviewed him. [5] This incident is far from isolated; in an interview with Andrea Kremer on the HBO series “Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel,” Rhiannon Walker, a reporter for the Washington Football Team and The Athletic, spoke about specific instances where they were sexually objectified by men in power.[6] Specifically, she detailed when she was propositioned by a man who worked for the Washington Football Team, and he “approached her while she was at dinner and proceeded to ask her” if she would date him if they were both single.[7] Finally, perhaps no story stole headlines in this realm like the bombshell report last year, when over a dozen women alleged sexual harassment and verbal abuse by former Washington Redskins employees.[8] Emily Applegate said that she often met female co-workers in the bathroom during lunch breaks to cry about the pervasive sexual harassment and verbal abuse she encountered during her job.[9] She specifically detailed a time when the former chief operating officer caller her “f---ing stupid” and then requesting she wear a tight dress for a meeting with clients, and when a wealthy suiteholder grabbed her friend’s backside in the middle of a game.
These stories occur daily and continue to be pervasive and rip the lives apart of many women in media. In fact, between 54% and 81% of women report experiencing some level of sexual harassment at work, and more than half of victims don’t report instances of workplace sexual harassment.[11] Female reporters should be able to do their jobs they worked hard to get and should not be privy to such mistreatment. Teams and leagues need to address the rampant harassment in order to provide women with the opportunity to do their job free of such inappropriate misconduct.

Regarding women’s sports in particular, there has been an issue regarding coverage. While there has been support for more coverage of women’s sports, ESPN, along with many other stations, have still prioritized men’s sports: “ESPN SportsCenter provided 91 seconds of coverage for the average WNBA game and 266 seconds of coverage for the average NBA game, despite claimed interest in the two leagues being much closer”. [12] And this issue is reflective of the larger issue, that female athletes dedicate their entire lives to perfecting their craft, putting countless hours on the field or the court to become the best possible athlete, just like men, yet men’s sports are more publicized and acknowledged at every level and in every sport. If we want to strive for equal women’s rights, the promotion and coverage of women’s sports along the same level as men would be a massive step.

Finally, even when women do receive coverage of their sports, the broadcasters and news headlines often undermine their accomplishments and put the spotlight on the larger sports world or even male counterparts, as if the accomplishment being done by a woman was something out of the ordinary. For example, on the world stage when Hungarian swimmer Katinka Hosszu broke the record in the 400-meter individual relay for swimming, Dan Hicks, an NBC sportscaster, immediately attributed credit to her husband for the win, saying “and there’s the man responsible” as cameras panned to her husband. [13] This type of biased coverage occurs not only live on television, but also in print forms, headlines that will be published forever. “After Corey Cogdell-Unrein (who happens to be married to Chicago Bears’ lineman Mitch Unrein) won a bronze medal in trap shooting, the Chicago Tribune tweeted: “Wife of Bears’ lineman wins bronze today in Rio Olympics”. [14] There is no difference in the training programs or time exerted by female athletes, yet broadcasters and journalists are often so quick to undermine their achievements and shed the spotlight elsewhere. Through sports, women often become role models for younger girls trying to emulate their achievements, and with the media shedding the light elsewhere, it is setting a dangerous example for years to come and representing a larger issue in women’s lives.
With no justification, women are brushed to the side and left “out of the game” in the intersection between sports and media. “A recent study out of the University of Cambridge that focused on the differences in how male and female athletes are described found, inter alia, that men are two to three times more likely than women to be mentioned in a sporting context, while women are disproportionately described in relation to their marital status, age or appearance”. [15] From a policy perspective, perhaps sports leagues can mandate certain coverage that reflects the successes of women and how they achieved their goals as opposed to undermining it by putting the spotlight elsewhere. In order to “put women back in the game”, it will take structural changes and a change in the real-world perspective that highlights women’s achievements. Below, please find specific examples by members of the course to further highlight the issues involved in media and women in sports.
One area that must change, in efforts to truly put women back in the game, is the way in which interviews of female public figures are conducted. Whether it be after a professional tennis match, on the red carpet, or the runway—the media tends to focus on what designer a woman is wearing, who she might be dating, when she is going to have kids, how she stays slim and attractive. Yet, the media fails to address her performance, her victory, the merits of her win or loss, and the overall merits of her.

In a way, reporters, and the media weaponize the woman’s appearance against her—wrongfully taking the focus off the game, her athleticism, or anything truly material to her performance. For instance, in 2015 an Australian reporter asked tennis pros Genie Bouchard and Serena Williams “[c]an you give us a twirl and tell us about your outfit?”[1] In 2017, Simone Biles competed on “Dancing with the Stars.” After one performance, and after she received her critiques, the host said the following, “I was waiting for you to smile at some of the compliments and you didn’t.”[2] In a 2015 radio interview, the hosts asked Ariana Grande, “[i]f you could use makeup or your phone one last time, which one would you use?”[3] In that same year, Polish model Magdalena Frackowiak, while getting her makeup done for the Victoria’s Secret Fashion show, was asked, “[w]hat are you most excited about eating after the show?”[4] The list of similar incidents, unfortunately, could go on and on and on.

By engaging in this line of questioning, interviewers—regardless of their own gender—reduce women to their gender, their image, their outfit. This likely happens for one of two reasons. One, interviewers, in these instances, do not see a professional athlete, a supermodel, or Oscar winning actress—they see a woman and only a woman. Or two, interviewers do see a professional athlete, supermodel, or actress, but choose to ask her about these superficial topics. Both options are problematic.
Regarding the first reason, the interviewer fails to see the woman as anything more than the superficial qualities they may be asking about—e.g., her hair, her outfit, her smile, her game celebrations. These non-meritorious qualities are synonymous to her personhood, her athletic success, her acting success, her career. This needs to change to put women back into the game. Here, however, interviewers must first see women as more than just merely the designer dress they are wearing on the red carpet, their beaming smile (or lack thereof), or their eating habits. Yet this would not suffice on its own, as I suspect not all interviewers fall into this first category.

That is, regarding the second reason, surely some interviewers make the conscious choice—they see the woman as a professional athlete, they see her hard work, her determination, her triumphs, and tribulations, and yet still choose to ask her “for a twirl.” This should not be for the woman being interviewed to fix. She should not have to correct the interviewer, or to point out the issue(s) with the questioning. Rather, it is upon the interviewer to know better. To understand that this line of questioning is harmful to women, that this line of questioning is sexist, demeaning, and simply rude. It is upon the interviewer to not ask these types of questions.

Serena Williams and Genie Bouchard are more than their tennis outfits and twirls. Simone Biles is more than her smile. Ariana Grande is more than her makeup and cellphone. Magdalena Frackowiak is more than her eating habits.
In 2015, a media campaign named “CoverTheAthlete” posted a video to YouTube, urging sports viewers to rethink the way they perceive both mens and womens sports coverage. The campaign has since regained popularity in 2023 after the Female Quotient, a community focused on promoting women’s equality, reposted the campaign video on TikTok.

The video features comments and questions that have been directed towards female athletes, adapted with responses from male athletes, to depict how absurd these questions seem when directed at male athletes. These comments and questions inquire about the athletes’ dating lives, body image, weight, hair, and clothing. One notable question asks a male athlete: “could you give us a twirl and tell us about your outfit?” Had this been an actual question directed at a male athlete, it certainly would have made headlines. Moments later, an unedited clip of a female tennis player appears, with her being asked - “could you give us a twirl and tell us about your outfit?” She appears to blush, but does not get angry - this is the kind of question female athletes encounter on a regular basis. Female athletes have endured sexist media coverage for years.

“Sexist commentary, inappropriate interview questions, and articles commenting on physical appearance not only trivializes a woman’s accomplishments, but also sends a message that a woman’s value is based on her looks, not her ability. And it’s much too commonplace.” #CoverTheAthlete
Even female Olympians do not receive the coverage their male counterparts receive. At the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, a British commentator frequently misnamed female soccer players and their coach. Rebecca Smith of the New Zealand women’s national football team described the bleak situation best - commentators not doing the “‘absolute minimum’ of learning an Olympic athlete’s name ‘basically reinforces that stereotype that no one is watching, [that] no one cares about women’s football, or female athletes.’” This situation begs the question - would a commentator have done this at a men’s Olympic soccer match, and kept their job?

In order for meaningful change to occur, women’s sports media coverage must shift from covering the woman to covering the athlete. With women’s sports viewership on the rise, there is hope that this change will occur. The most important question sports media commentators must ask themselves is - “would I say this to a male athlete?” If the answer is no, they likely should not say it to a female athlete. The #CoverTheAthlete campaign is exposing sexism in women’s sports coverage, and is encouraging broadcasters and viewers alike to reconsider where emphasis is placed in women’s sports coverage.

"Twirlgate" sexism row

"I wouldn't ask Rafa [Nadal] or Roger [Federer] to twirl. Whether it's sexist or not, I don't know. I can't answer that.

Serena Williams
World Number 1
In a Barstool Sports podcast episode following the Chiefs-Jets game, co-host Dan Katz made a daring demand: A sex tape from Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce, to compensate for her distracting and threatening presence during their sacred football Sundays. Co-host Eric Sollenberger joined in agreement, adding that an “octopus” – a touchdown followed by a two-point conversion, which was completed by the Jets – is what “they should call Taylor Swift’s vagina.”

Without pornographic proof of Swift’s relationship with Travis Kelce, Katz reasoned, the relationship was fake. To streamline the process, Katz offered his preferences: “I want to see P[enis] in V[agina]. I want to see insertion. Give me a Lauren Boebert.”

Rather unsurprisingly, women, no matter how accomplished in their own right, continue to be ridiculed when found in traditionally male spaces. And also rather unsurprisingly, it appears that many people still have yet to learn from the #MeToo movement. Katz and Sollenberger’s implication that Taylor must prove her worth before entering spaces that men feel entitled to is dangerous. To require Taylor to prove her worth through sexual performance is even worse. When the female celebrity identity is constructed by a culture that publicly demands unadulterated access to women’s bodies, the price that women must pay for a seat at the table only increases.
My original assertion was that there is a disproportionate number in viewership when comparing male and female sports. While this remains true, I was pleasantly surprised to find that this is slowly changing, and there are efforts to encourage this change from the media industry. The question then becomes how can we accelerate this change, and what is the proverbial roadblock? While the below numbers are encouraging, there is still a major disparity in viewership, and we should continue to highlight and improve this problem.

- Bottom line: The WNBA ratings pales in comparison to other major men's sports. For example, the NFL has averaged 17 Million viewers per telecast, NASCAR 2.2 Million, MLB 1.4 Million and NBA 1.6 Million. On the other hand, the WNBA, founded in 1996, averages only 321,00 and that's the best it's done in 20 years.
- Minor successes:
  - Increase in women’s sports media coverage from 4% to 15% with potential of 20% by 2025
  - Nielsen reports these problems:
    - Coverage of women’s sports is hard to find
      - ESPN SportsCenter provided 91 seconds of coverage for average WNBA game and 266 seconds of coverage for average NBA game
    - Broadcasters and sponsors are not taking charge in promoting women’s sports
      - 2023 is first cycle where Women’s World Cup broadcasting and sponsorship rights sold separately from men’s at large scale. This lets advertisers get more targeted with their ad spend and grow segmented fan audiences
    - Fans reward brands that invest in sports
      - 44% of WNBA fans claim to have visited the brand’s website and 28% claim to have bought something from brand – compared to 26% and 24% of NBA fans surveyed for the same sponsorship responses
      - 69% of Women’s World Cup fans believe brands are more appealing when participate in sports sponsorships
      - 56% of football fans likely to inform themselves about brands that sponsor sports events and 59% would pick sponsor’s product over a rival’s if prices and quality were the same.
    - When ESPN expanded coverage of NCAA Women’s Basketball Tournament in 2021, audience reach of first round doubled compared to 2019
I chose this article because it involves the intersection between gender, race, politics, and sports. Gu’s story shows how sports can be a path for young people to rapidly enter the public eye, and the public will scrutinize not only the athlete’s talent, but the many aspects of identity tied to them.

Eileen Gu is half Chinese and half American. She grew up in San Francisco and spent her summers in Beijing. Gu made the decision to compete for China at fifteen years old, articulating her desire “to serve as a role model for female athletes in China, and raise the profile of skiing in a country where it is still largely a nascent sport.” The article also notes her representation of China has opened doors for several lucrative sponsorships and modeling opportunities.

One of the main reasons that people oppose her decision comes from the political tension between the US and China. The article notes how “social media users and conservative pundits call[ed] Ms. Gu a ‘traitor’ and ‘ungrateful’… suggesting that her identity must fall into a binary - Chinese or American, but not both.” Others criticize her decision to represent a country whose government has committed severe human rights abuses.

The article highlighted opinions from Chinese and Taiwanese Americans, which included both supporters and critics of Gu’s decision. I found it interesting how from some perspectives, Gu is simply a talented Asian American teenage athlete who wanted to use her growing platform to inspire young girls who look up to her. At the same time, the duality of Gu’s identity caused a lot of confusion and controversy.

Several questions came to mind while reading the article. These are not straightforward, and I do not have the answers for them. Rather, I think they highlight the complexity of identity for women leaders in sports.

1. One thought I had was, isn’t this about her ability to ski? Why does the country she chose matter so much? It made me think about how the impact of sports on society and culture is so much greater than I initially thought.
2. Would there be such a controversy if instead of being half Chinese, she was, for instance, half American and half French, and chose to compete for the French team? In that case, would people still question her “gratitude” for America? Are racial minorities obligated to feel “grateful” for living in America?
3. To what extent are people with a large following responsible for speaking up against injustice? I believe it is crucial to use one’s platform to highlight the voices of those who are oppressed. However, I also believe that individuals should be considered separate entities from their governments. For example, people did not accuse every athlete who chose to compete for the US during the Trump Administration to be staunch Trump supporters. Granted, this is a complex issue and not every case is perfectly analogous.
4. Would things be different if instead she was a young man instead of a young woman and model? Part of Gu’s motivation to represent China is to inspire girls and young women who are less represented in certain sports. Could sexism contribute to some of the negative responses to her popularity?
INCREASING VISIBILITY OF WOMEN’S SPORTS  -- Liam Leahy

Since the advent of televised sports, female athletes have been underrepresented in the media. Although as a society it appears that we have made strides in breaking glass ceilings and increasing female participation in various male-dominated fields, no such positive movement has occurred in the coverage of women’s sports. According to an investigation by Dr. Michael Messner of the University of Southern California and Cheryl Cooky of Purdue University, the coverage of women’s sports in network news peaked in 1999 at 8.7% (Messer and Cooky 9). As of 2019, that number has dropped to 5.7%, only marginally higher than the 5.0% featured in 1989, when the Co-Investigators first began studying these trends (Crockett) (Messer and Cooky 8). Rather than promoting women’s sports, the study found that men’s “Big Three” sports (football, basketball, and baseball) dominated, receiving a combined 71.7% of coverage (11-12). Meanwhile, coverage of comparable women’s sports, such as stories about the WNBA, had dramatically asymmetrical coverage in contrast to the NBA: when the NBA was out of season, it still received substantially more coverage than the WNBA while it was in season. (14-15). In March 2009, when the WNBA was out of season and the NBA was in season, the WNBA received no coverage from major outlets (14).

Regardless of the stagnated coverage of women’s sports, Messner and Cooky noted that, from 1989 to 2009, there was a marked decrease in the once-common practice of commentators using sarcastic humor in portraying women athletes as objects of ridicule, participants in laughable “gag sports,” and/or as sexual objects (17). The study praised the increase in positive coverage, especially during coverage of women’s history month (17). However, this reduction in negative news did not correspond to an overall uptick in news; In 2009, women’s sports represented “a paltry 1.6% of the coverage on TV news, and an anemic 1.4% on ESPN’s SportsCenter” (22). Sadly, the disappearance of content sexualizing or disparaging female athletes oftentimes led to disappearance of coverage of women’s sports at all (Zirin). According to Messner, this dramatic rift in coverage between men and women’s sports does not appear supported by an actual dramatic reduction in viewership for women’s sports:

“[I]n 2009 at 2010, over 11 million people attended women’s NCAA games. In 2010 the men’s sweet sixteen games on CBS averaged 4.9 million viewers while women’s games averaged 1.6 million viewers and the championship game between UConn and Stanford drew 3.5 million viewers... [T]here is a tremendous audience out there but when we look at TV news and highlight shows what we found was that the women’s NCAA tournament got no coverage at all on the network affiliates and it got a tiny bit of coverage on ESPN and most of that coverage was on that scrolling ticker at the bottom of the screen.” (Zirin)

Additionally, 2018 polling data published by Nielsen reveals that 84% of sports fans are interested in women’s sport (“Global Interest in Women’s Sports”). Perhaps surprisingly, of that 84%, 51% were male respondents (“Global Interest in Women’s Sports”). From the surveyed population, nearly half said they would consider attending a live women’s sporting event and said they would watch more if women’s sports were accessible on free TV (“Global Interest in Women’s Sports”). This disparity between viewer interest and actual coverage presents an important question: in a world where there exists high viewer demand for women’s sports but major sports media outlets do not cover them, what steps may be taken to ensure that female athletes are getting adequate coverage? What forms of leadership can be undertaken to ensure that these deserving individuals are given their spotlight? One exemplary leader we might look to is Jenny Nguyen, founder of The Sports Bra.

On April 1, 2018, Jenny Nguyen went with some of her friends to a local sports bar to watch the N.C.A.A. women’s basketball championship. But, despite there being 30 plus TVs in the bar, not a single one was tuned in. The main projector, instead of this championship, had a regular season basketball game. The group had to convince the server to put the game on one of the smaller TVs that was not even equipped with sound. Despite this, the game was exhilarating:

I
I think there was like three — 3.2 seconds left or something. And Arike Ogunbowale gets the basketball at the three-point line on an in-bounds play, takes one dribble and launches it and the buzzer goes off — and the ball goes through the net. And I swear to you, we lost our minds. No one else knew why. Everybody in the bar was staring at us, because nobody was watching the same game we were. (Crockett)

After the game, Nguyen couldn’t shake the idea that that exhilarating game could have been even better. Rather than being relegated to one small TV with the sound turned off, Nguyen imagined having her own women’s sports bar where she and her friends could watch a women’s game in its full glory (Crockett).

As a child, Nguyen had been obsessed with basketball, even wanting to play professionally. But her parents wanted her to follow a more traditional path; “Girls don’t play sports,” she recalls her mother saying. When Nguyen decided she wanted to become a chef, her dad told her, hoping to discourage her, “Jenny, I want you to find the worst job in that field that you can find, do it for a year, and if after that you still want that to be your life, then go for it.” Despite her parents’ attempts to discourage her from alternative paths, Nguyen persisted. She took her dad’s advice and began working at a fast casual restaurant chain. The experience did not dampen her - she found that she flourished in the high stress, team-oriented environment. Finding her passion in being a chef led to her eventual graduation from culinary school then, over the next fifteen years, a career as an executive chef for Fortune 500 companies and universities (Crockett).

In 2020, Nguyen began taking steps to make her idea for a women’s sports bar a reality. She came up with a name, The Sports Bra, and began applying for loans to get the business off the ground. But, during the peak of the pandemic, banks were highly scrutinizing; they would not invest in a bar and restaurant when so many were closing during the pandemic, especially for a risky new concept pushed by a first-time entrepreneur. Nguyen again persisted in the face of discouragement. She cashed out her own life savings of $27,000 and launched a Kickstarter campaign that raised over $105,000 in just over a month - a sign that her idea really did have support. When the Sports Bra opened for business on April 1st, 2022, the first day of the N.C.A.A. Final Four, there was a media frenzy - hundreds of people out front hours before opening (Crockett). That excitement persisted, helping the Sports Bra make nearly $1 million in its first eight months, three times the earnings of the average bar in America (Hart).

Despite its success, Nguyen still faces several struggles in living out the Sports Bra’s goal of increasing visibility of women’s sports. Sourcing media coverage remains a struggle for Nguyen; Despite the growing number of media companies focused on fulfilling the growing demand for women’s sports (i.e. Just Women Sports, The Women’s Sports Network, and ESPNW), providing a steady stream of content akin to that provided by mainstream sports channels requires multiple subscriptions to multiple different platforms. Aside from economic or logistical issues, Nguyen also has had to worry about male critics who have been slow to embrace women’s sports. But, from those men who have come to the Sports Bra, she has seen a growing admiration for women’s sports:

NGUYEN: A lot of the guys that come into The Sports Bra on the regular don’t watch men’s sports anymore, period. A lot of the men’s sports, to them, have gotten so convoluted with drama, ego, selfish play. Whereas, in a lot of women’s sports, it’s much more, like, classic fundamentals, and team-oriented.

... CROCKETT: Do you ever have like an old school sports bar guy wander in and say, ‘What the hell’s going on here? Where’s my baseball game?’
NGUYEN: Absolutely. And they sit down and they’re like, “This is rad.” (Crockett)
The success of The Sports Bra offers one potential roadmap for shining a spotlight on women’s sports. In a world where our collective culture makes it easy to be a fan of men’s sports, and where the Big Three men’s sports of football, basketball, and baseball dominate sports media, supporting female athletes begins with providing access to easily watch those games. The empirical evidence has shown that there is a burgeoning demand for women’s sports from men and women alike, and that when the content is made easily available for people to watch, they’ll watch. This success is why, less than a year after The Sports Bra opened, the United States’ second women’s sports bar, Rough and Tumble, opened in Seattle (Board). This increased visibility and representation is a vital component of putting women back in the game.
The 2023 Women’s Soccer World Cup shattered records in viewership, a positive sign and perhaps a monumental step in the right direction toward recognizing women’s hard work and successes in professional sports. In fact, through the first 15 days of the tournament, there were 22 million unique users, an average of 2.4 million visiting FIFA Women’s World Cup daily, surpassing the entire 2019 tournament in just over two weeks. The viewership clearly was not the problem: “broadcast figures from around the world have equally been overwhelmingly positive, with records broken across multiples countries on a near daily basis”. However, through a deeper analysis into how certain countries got to where they are, the disparities between men’s and women’s sports became evident, a stark contrast in the treatment of their inequalities, one that is pervasive across multiple continents.

Jamaica, for example, almost could not afford to send their women’s team to the World Cup, and the mother of midfielder, Havana Solaun, had to scramble to set up a GoFundMe, “Reggae Girlz Rise Up,” to raise money to send the team to the tournament. Players on the team sent a length statement to the Jamaican Football Federation regarding pay and other issues, and they were told their concerns would be addressed quickly, but were not. In Nigeria, the Nigeria Football Federation still owes several of its players their $1,500 allowance from a tournament last year, and they heavily considered boycotting their first match in this year’s World Cup. In South Africa, female players make just one-tenth of the salaries of what the men make for the same length game. FIFA, despite knowing it is their tournament and there are clear, fragrant violations of labor rights and evident discrimination against its female athletes, has been a bystander to the discrepancies in these countries and have not addressed the issues women all over are facing.
On the international level, certain abuses of women’s rights have been addressed, demonstrating some optimism. For example, in 2019, the Afghanistan Football Federal president, Keramuudin Karim, was banned for life from anything football related and fined a million Swiss francs by Fifa after he was found guilty of sexually abusing various players, an abuse of his power as president and FIFA ethics violation.[7] But it will certainly take a lot more than just a termination of one nation’s president in order to achieve anything closer to equality for men’s and women’s sports on the national level. Prior to the kickoff at this year’s World Cup, Australia, one of the co-hosts of the tournament, posted a strong video of many of its players calling out Fifa for the discrimination in the gender pay gap across the world.[8] Some nations—including Wales earlier this year—have achieved some sort of pay equality for both men’s and women’s teams.[9] And the pay is not the only issue; there are clear differences in the playing conditions, the locker rooms teams play in, and the uniforms and equipment.

However, progress is still progress, and there has been optimism toward a brighter future, one that puts women back in the game at an equal playing field as men. And it starts with nations working individually against their leadership, as well as on a global scale, to strive toward a future of women’s rights in sports. In 1973, the US Open shocked the sport when it offered equal prize money to both men and women, which began to set the tone for other tournaments along the way.[10] This led to an immediate impact that has only improved through today; in 1979, the Avon Championships became the first tournament to offer $100,000 to its champion, the figure has continued to grow and grow each decade, and now it is over $175 million.[11] Hope is not lost, and this is hopefully just the beginning for the growth of women’s sports and the beginning of a future that offers equal pay around the world in all sports.
Although Football (or as Americans call–soccer) was invented in England in the 19th century, Brazil is well-known as the “country of football”, being it the most popular sport in the country. Brazil has the national team that won the most men’s FIFA World Cups (5 times), has one of the most competitive national leagues of the world, and has a reputation of “producing” and “exporting” football players, including Pelé, many times referred to as the best player of all times.

In this context, it might be asked where are woman in this history? How the country of football sees the female football or even woman supporters? Unfortunately, the answers to those questions are far from being positive. Although in recent years there have been several efforts to change the scenario, for a long-time women have been excluded from every single part of the game, as players, supporters, coaches, referees and commentators.

According to the Brazilian biggest media company[1], the first records of women’s football games in Brazil are dated of around 1920, however it was a hidden practice. With the increase in women’s football games, Brazilian society, which was very sexists at the time (and still is today) did not accept women playing football, which led to the issuing of a federal decree banning women’s sports. The decree provided that “Women will not be allowed to practice sports that are incompatible with their natural conditions”. Although “football” was not expressly mentioned, it was understood that such sport was included in the ban. The ban was straightened with the establishment of the military dictatorship in Brazil in 1964, when the Brazilian military government published a new decree specifying banned women’s sports: football, futsal, beach football, water polo, rugby, baseball, weightlifting and any type of fight.

On the other side, the men’s football was growing, becoming more popular and professional. The first professional team of the country was established in 1900, the Brazilian national team was founded in 1914, and two years after was founded the Brazilian Sports Confederation that would be responsible for the management of football in the country. During the years when the women’s football was banned, the biggest football stadium at the time was built in Brazil, Maracanã, Pelé was playing and being recognizing as the best player of the world, and Brazil won 3 FIFA World Cups.

In the late 80s, the Brazilian women’s team was finally formed and started to participate in its first championships. As an example, in 1988, FIFA made a tournament called Women’s Invitational Tournament, with the aim of encouraging women’s football worldwide, in which Brazil finished in third place. However, one symbolic fact draws attention: no clothes were made for the female players, and they traveled with leftover clothes from the men’s team.

THE WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE COUNTRY OF FOOTBALL, BRAZIL

-- Mariana Rosa

[1] Refer to the source or note for details.
A fact that considerably helped Brazilian society to pay more attention to women’s football was the rise of Marta. In 2003, with only 17 years old, Marta started playing for the national team, the woman that lately would be recognized as the best female football player in the world and being highly responsible for the growth of the female football in Brazil. In 2006, Marta won her first FIFA best in the world trophy, the first time in 6. Among women and men, Marta is the Brazilian national team’s top scorer, the greatest scorer in FIFA World Cups and one of the players who has won the FIFA best in the world trophy the most times, only behind Messi.

Marta’s achievements gave rise to a discussion about why the best Brazilian female player still did not receive the same attention as the main Brazilian male player of the generation, Neymar, and why Marta received a salary 100 time less than Neymar’s.

Also, despite Marta’s huge success, the women’s football never achieved the same audience and public interest as men’s, as Brazil, as most countries of the world, does not have a women’s football culture. Despite all the evolution, we (girls and women) still grow up being taught that football is a sport for boys and that girls should not play or watch football games. Alongside with that, Brazilian media companies rarely cover or broadcast women’s football and, so, the Brazilian teams do not have much incentive or wiliness to invest in women’s football. This culture and the sexist play a major role in the difficulties of developing a strong professional women’s football league.

Also, the exclusion of women from football does not just happen as players. The view that football is a sport that only men should play was followed by the view that also only men should watch or enjoy football, be a coach, referee or commentator. Even nowadays some people are still impressed when some woman says that she enjoys football. Other times, even when a men accept the fact that a women can be interested in football, he doubts the fact that she can understand the rules and rarely take seriously a woman’s opinion.

However, in the past years, with the increase in discussions about equality, sexism and diversity, some efforts have been made in Brazil to shed more light on women’s football. In 2017, the Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol – Conmebol (the entity responsible for the main championships in South America) issued a decision to limit the participation in its championships to teams that also have a women’s team from 2019 onwards. The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) followed the same path and forced all the Brazilian teams that played in the Brazilian national A league to have and invest in a women’s team. In 2023, CBF announced that this obligation will be extended to all teams in leagues B, C and D. Therefore, the Brazilian teams no longer have the option of neglecting women’s football.
On the field, only in the last years have women started to be more included as commentators and referees. In 2019, Ana Thaís, a Brazilian commentator, was the first woman to ever commentate on a men’s football game on television in Brazil. Furthermore, the 2022 FIFA World Cup was the first World Cup in which the Brazilian media truly included women as commentators and journalists to cover the championship. In 2021, Edina Alves was the first women to referee a men’s FIFA game and there are some Brazilian referees participating in men’s and women’s football games in Brazil. In management, evolution is much slower, currently among the 20 teams that play the national A league, there is no female coach, only one has a woman as president and, according to an IBGE[2], considering all Brazilian teams, only 5% has a woman in its presidency.

Moreover, it is worth noting that although women are gradually being more included in the football scene, sexism is still quite latent and women in these roles are not rarely sexualized or criticized in a much more aggressive or harsher way than men. Therefore, although some relevant developments have occurred in recent years, there still a lot of work to be done to achieve equality in football and to definitely include women in this sport.
Do religious beliefs in Muslim countries discourage women’s participation in physical activities? Are there other factors that come into play for an overall lower rate of female participation in sports in these countries? The article “Assessing the Association Between Pakistani Women’s Religious Beliefs and Sports Participation” by Laar et al. addresses these questions, focusing specifically on women living in the Sindh province of Pakistan. The authors used a snowball sampling method to select 357 female respondents. The results of the study contradicted the traditional view that Islam, as a religion, is against women’s sports. Thus, broader cultural norms must be considered to explain the lower rate of women’s participation in sports in Pakistan.

The study used a short self-report questionnaire to measure the strength of religious faith of the respondents along with their level of participation in sports. The results showed that respondents who self-reported strong religious beliefs also reported that Islam did not have any conflicts with sports participation, even if they did not participate themselves. The authors also pointed to specific teachings in the Quran, which advocate for physical activity such as horse riding, swimming, shooting, hunting, fencing, wrestling, and running – even for women. The Quran promotes “development and maintenance of the spirit and physical strength, regardless of gender,” although previous studies have pointed to religious constraints on Muslim women’s participation in sports. The study contends that the relationship between women’s participation in sports in Muslim countries is weakened not by religious beliefs, but by some external factors. If not religious beliefs, what is causing the discrepancy between female and male participation in sports in Pakistan?

Broader, cultural phenomena relating to the patriarchy likely have more of an influence on athletic participation than any religious ban on sports for women. There are certain factors that I believe stem from overarching religious beliefs, such as the norm of wearing modest clothing and separating the genders, which might limit women’s athletic participation. However, there are some cultural attitudes that may be similarly observed in Western (non-Muslim) countries as well. For example, women in Pakistan tend to get married and have children at a younger age than in Western countries, and the societal norm that women are the ones who must stay home for childrearing is pervasive in Pakistan. Though to a different extent, I am reminded of our conversations in class about how mothers in certain careers in the U.S. face additional hurdles to work that their male counterparts who are fathers do not. More media attention for male athletes and stereotyping of what types of careers are traditionally “female” likely also play into the lower participation rate, standards which are present in Western countries to varying degrees as well.

In speaking with my own mother, who is from the Punjab province of Pakistan, I learned that she grew up minimally participating in sports given the cultural barriers and her young age of marriage and childbearing. But now she observes a shift in today’s generation of women in Pakistan, with an accelerating rate of participation in sports across the board. From Alpine ski championships to the women’s national cricket team, Pakistani women are finally beginning to enter the game. This shift coincides with the general trend of Pakistani women becoming more independent within the cultural norms that exist in the country and substantiates the authors’ claims that the mere prevalence of Islam in Pakistan is not what causes the root issues of women’s rights in the country. Perhaps Pakistan is undergoing a renaissance for female athletes in the country.
Seven years ago, on a beautiful August night, I was having dinner with my parents, with the television broadcasting the random daily news. Suddenly, news came in and caught everyone’s attention – China Women’s Volleyball Team won the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics by magically defeating Serbia in the final. Holding my breath while still doubting the truth, I grabbed my phone and found thousands of newsletters authenticating this dream. Watching the six girls holding hands together and standing on the podium, I could not help but imagine how this legendary team would continue inspiring millions of girls in China to fight in the sports field and beyond.

China Women’s Volleyball Team was the first sports team I came to know ever since my childhood, and its spirit has gradually developed into a national symbol representing the “never stop fighting” characteristic of Chinese athletes. The team’s journey to becoming one of the world’s volleyball powerhouses began in the 1950s when volleyball gained popularity in China. It first made its mark on the world stage in the 1980s when it won the third World Cup by defeating Japan in the final. Under the guidance of the legendary coach Lang Ping, a former Olympic champion, the team reached its pinnacle in the 1980s and 1990s. Ms. Ping played an essential role in shaping the team’s strategies and instilling a winning mentality among the players. During this period, the China Women’s Volleyball Team won numerous prestigious titles, including Olympic gold medals in 1984 and 2004.
However, after winning the 2004 Athens Olympics, the team faced several setbacks and challenges that impacted their performance between 2004 and 2016. One of the significant setbacks was the retirement of several key players who contributed significantly to the team’s success. Also, several players suffered serious injuries during the training, impacting their performance and overall dynamics. Changes in coaching staff also disrupted the rhythm and cohesion of a team, requiring time for the players to adjust to new training and tactical approaches. As a result, the team lost many opportunities to regain its world reputation until 2015, winning the 12th World Cup and gaining its ticket to the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics. The continued perseverance of this legendary team inspired millions of Chinese youths. Its influence has already independent from the winning results and reached beyond the sports playing field. Though the team lost to Japan in the final of the 2022 AVC Cup, millions of fans still honored the player’s spirit displayed in the final.[1] President Xi even commented, "The Chinese women's volleyball team represents the spirit of the nation in an era that strongly resonates with the utmost efforts made to fight for the rise of the Chinese nation.”[2]

Two perspectives of this team have inspired girls in China to fight for leadership in their own areas: (1) perseverance and (2) solidarity. The team embodies the spirit of resilience and determination, never ceasing to fight regardless of the challenges they face. During the 12 years of downtime, hundreds of negative comments hit against the team and doubted the team’s ability to regain its glory. In the final of the 2016 Rio Olympics, the team even lost the first round to Serbia, with the team leader, Ting Zhu, suffering multiple serious injuries. However, the team players exhibited unwavering dedication, constantly pushing their limits in pursuit of excellence. Their relentless work ethic and a profound sense of teamwork and unity allowed them to overcome the obstacles in the latter three rounds and finally stand on the world podium to show the world a great spirit.
That year, 2016, also marked my first year in college when I felt lost in seeking a right direction to pursue a career. While enjoying summertime, I was always afraid of the unknown future while being far away from my family. The team’s spirit inspired me never to be afraid of any setbacks on the way forward because each setback becomes a stepping stone for the next level.

Another secret for this legendary team to stand head and shoulders above many of China’s other teams is the solidarity among players and coaching staff. While the men’s soccer team has yet to win a World Cup match, and the men’s basketball team has not made it into the top five, the women's volleyballers have long been among the international elite, even with fewer budgets. In 2016, China set up a plan to become a soccer superpower by 2050 and has spent hundreds of millions on buying foreign players.[3] However, the women’s national volleyball team hit this goal way overhead without great plans and rich budgets. The international women’s volleyball landscape was never easy, with traditional powerhouses like Brazil, the U.S., and Russia maintaining their high standards and new stars like Serbia and Italy improving their programs. However, the team fought in this fierce field by always staying together. The solidarity displayed at countless moments shows the team’s determination to fight against any type of bias or discrimination against female athletes to stand on the world’s podium, which is common in most Asian countries. Such solidarity inspires millions of girls in China to “hold hands” while fighting against patriarchy on their way to leadership and encourages us to dream big and believe in our capabilities.
On August 6, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department arrested Masato Uchishiba, age 33, a gold medalist in the men's 66-kilogram judo division at the 2004 Athens Olympics and 2008 Beijing Olympics, on suspicion of assaulting a teenage female member of a university judo club he was coaching. It was shocking for Japanese people, especially those who love sports, to hear this news. However, this incident provides a powerful insight into the sexual harassment associated with the master-disciple relationship in Japanese sports field. To prevent female athletes from being sexually harassed by their coaches and others in the future, and from losing their way in the midst of their goal, I report this incident here. The details of the facts are as follows:

In mid-September 2011, the women's judo club of Kyushu University of Nursing and Social Welfare had four female members, their coach Masato Uchishiba, and a male coach at a hotel in Hachioji, Tokyo, during a four-day, three-night training camp. From September 19 to 20 of the same year, Coach Uchishiba and related persons gave alcohol to plaintiff A, a 19-year-old female member of the club, at a restaurant and karaoke box, and carried A, who was limp, immobile, and almost unconscious, on his back and had sexual intercourse with her when they were alone together back in the hotel room. The victims drank 15 draft beers, eight grape sours, two bottles of shochu, and two bottles of wine with seven other people at a yakiniku restaurant. The method of drinking was based on the rule of chugging the glass in one gulp, which requires the victim to drink all at once when the defendant lifts the glass with one hand. The victim was unconscious, and it seems that the defendant inserted his penis into her when she came to her senses.

Defendant Uchishiba pleaded not guilty, claiming that there was an agreement between him and A. Still, the Tokyo District Court ruled that it could not be said that there was an agreement and sentenced him to five years in prison, as the prosecution had requested.[1]

During the trial, it was revealed that, in addition to A, he also had sexual intercourse with female club members B and C at the hotel where the training camp was held on the day of the incident and that he had sexual intercourse with three of the four female club members who attended the training camp. Of these, C had filed a damage report to police but withdrew it because it was too painful to discuss.
Uchishiba pleaded not guilty and appealed, but the appeal was dismissed, and the appeal against it was also dismissed, and the judgment became final.

I believe that Uchishiba's case is highly malicious in the Japanese sports world, where the master-disciple relationship is emphasized, in that he used his position as a teacher to force his students into a physical relationship. Obedience to a coach or master tends to be emphasized, especially in traditional sports such as judo. In this case, the courageous victim A went to court, but the behavior of C, who withdrew his damage report because of the pain he felt, seems to reflect such values. Uchishiba utilized his status as a coach and an opportunity for a four-day, three-night training camp. He made his students drink alcohol; the law doesn’t expect mature adults to give alcohol to minors, of course. Hence, his attitude is also criticized by Parents, mass media, social media such as the Japan Judo Federation, and organizations.[2]

In my opinion, in Japan, harmony is valued in the first place traditionally, and the emphasis tends to be on following the opinions of those in a higher position.[3] Indeed, I experienced this cultural norm when I became the first female driver in one of the transportation districts of a railroad company: I was the only female driver's apprentice at my office at the time, but my instructors discriminated against me, a female driver's apprentice, against male driver's apprentices because the job of a driver is traditionally a man's job and they did not want women to be able to operate a train easily. They gave me detention practice and made fun of my breasts in front of everyone. Other male driver’s apprentices were not scolded as I did. I was so embarrassed and feared their training, but I had to take their training to have a license for driving trains. In contrast, it was extremely strict about resisting persons in superior positions, and I could not immediately report that I felt extremely uncomfortable when I was told during training that I was not eligible for a train driver because I had boobs for the company.

I believe that this traditional cultural prejudice that one must be considered preferable by those in a superior position makes things worse. It is necessary for not only sports fields but also the whole Japanese society to review those values, customs, and prejudices one by one and take a scalpel to the sports world to prevent future victims and encourage young girls to go to the game fields.
Self-reporting sexual assault can be challenging in a culture with a victim-blaming narrative. In South Korea, discussions of sexual assault has traditionally been taboo as a societal cloud of shame surrounds gender-based violence. Victims often battle a notion that they are partially responsible for the crimes of the assailants. Notably, Korea’s Education Ministry released updated sex education curriculum guidelines for public schools in 2015, which stated “[f]rom the perspective of a man who spends a lot of money on dates, it is natural that he would want a commensurate compensation from the woman. In such conditions, unwanted date rape can occur . . .” The manual further elaborates that “people of the opposite sex should not be alone together by themselves” and that “if sexually harassed on the subway, [one should] step on his foot as if by mistake”. Advancing such gender-based stereotypes on official documents and suggesting men paying for meals on a date as a contributing factor to date rape could reinforce the dangerous victim-blaming narrative. The Education Ministry amassed criticism for two years, but announced that there are no official changes to be made in 2017.

Despite the existence of the traditional victim blaming narrative in sexual assault cases, the wake of the global #MeToo movement created an opening for the emergence of a new narrative: addressing the assaults and the perpetrators. The #MeToo wave inspired a variety of initiatives across different sectors of the South Korean society, including in sports.

In 2019, Shim Suk-hee, an Olympic speedskating champion who has won two gold medals, alleged that her former coach had sexually assaulted her. In court, Shim testified that her coach beat her and verbally abused her since she was seven, and even beat her with an ice hockey stick and broke her fingers. She further testified that the sexual abuse started in 2014, when she was seventeen, and extended over a period of three years. The court in Suwon city held that "the accused committed sexual assault by force, repeatedly using the victim’s inability to protest against her speedskating coach for the national team." The coach was already facing an eighteen month term for inflicting violence against three other athletes. Following Shim’s allegations, the coach was sentenced to ten years and six months in prison, with a requirement to complete two hundred hours of treatment for sexual offenders. The horrifying ordeals of an Olympic gold medalist was not an isolated incident. Shim’s testimony served as a catalyst for other athletes to come forward and join the #MeToo movement in hopes of bringing change. An organization representing speed skating athletes reported that at least give other female skaters have come forward with sexual abuse allegations against male coaches. Athletes in judo, taekwondo, soccer, and wrestling have similarly reported sexual misconduct of their male coaches.
The sports sector often subjects young athletes to an intense culture of training with rigid hierarchical structures between athletes and coaches. In the process, athletes may be exposed to an environment where recognition or disclosure of abuse and harassment is challenging and daunting. According to researchers, sexual grooming is defined as a “process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance, and maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure.” The young age of the athletes and hierarchical nature of the coach and athlete relationship gives adults an opportunity to have considerable control over the athletes. Coaches who excel at enhancing performance of the athletes are sometimes mistakenly believed to be equally caring about the athletes’ well-being. Athletes and their parents may place their trust in the hands of a predator without realizing the true intentions they harbor. While there are many great coaches, the nature of sports may foster an environment that facilitates the manipulation of victims by adults with exploitative intentions.

Following the abuse allegations of many athletes, South Korea, in 2019, initiated its most extensive investigation into sexual abuse in sports. The National Human Rights Commission of South Korea set out to conduct a fact-finding investigation, aiming to interview an estimate of 30,000 individuals composed of athletes, coaches and officials. The objective of the investigation was to counter the rigid, hierarchical culture of the sports industry that has a chilling effect on reporting abuse for fears of repercussions. The initiative marked a significant shift from the country’s traditional victim blaming narrative prevalent in sexual assault cases. The treatment of coaches who perpetrated sexual abuse and extensive investigations into the industry served as an illustrative example of society taking action to protect victims of sexual abuse.

Going forward, the Human Rights Commission indicated their intentions to establish an independent nation-wide surveillance system to collect pertinent data, conduct investigations, and educate officials on human rights violations. The institutional response seeks to dismantle the entrenched culture of silence prevalent in sports, which had previously permitted sexual abuse to persist. The measures reflect the country’s engagement with long-standing challenges of victim blaming in sexual abuse cases and imbalance of power within various spheres. Societal shifts like the #MeToo movement and the subsequent governmental responses demonstrate the progress towards acknowledging and addressing sexual misconduct.
This article focuses on the legacy of Sania Mirza, an Indian tennis player. Before I started reading this piece, I was overwhelmed by memories of growing up and hearing the Indian community discuss Ms. Mirza. As a young South Asian girl, I was in awe of Sania’s spirit and talent. I also was in awe of her undeterred resistance in the face of rampant sexism within tennis. All of these elements came through in this article.

As the article describes, Sania is a trailblazer. As a young Muslim woman excelling in tennis (being the first Indian person ever to win a WTA title), she faced vitriol both on and off the court. There was constant criticism leveled at Sania’s clothing: everything she wore was scrutinized beyond measure, to the point where she needed security detail. Sania also had a high-profile relationship with Pakistani tennis player Shoaib Malik, which led to further critique of her allegiance to India. When she was being interviewed about her autobiography, one of the few spaces a woman can reclaim her narrative, she still faced questions about when she would “settle down” and choose motherhood.

In reading the article’s recounting of these challenges, I couldn’t help but marvel at the irony of how so much media attention surrounded her physical appearance and relationship status while delving little into her career-defining moments. The former overshadowed the latter. This highlighted a problem I have long seen women face—that the media narrative defines them not by their achievements but by whether they conform to a measure of conventional, traditional womanhood that is patriarchal and arbitrary. This made the article’s mentions of Sania’s resistance all the more empowering. I felt pride and happiness every time I read about Sania telling off a reporter, wearing feminist T-shirts, and quipping in the face of sexism. Sania rose to the challenge and confronted difficulties head-on. When asked to describe her legacy, she said: “I would like people to remember that this girl fought for the right things.” I know I will remember her that way.
This article discusses how there is a scarcity of South Asian women in football around the world. The opening of this article struck me, as it states how despite there being 20 years since the seminal film Bend it like Beckham was released, this year’s FIFA cup did not have a single player of South Asian heritage. Bend it like Beckham, which focuses on a “young South Asian woman fighting for her right to play football, was a formative film. It was the first depiction I saw of a South Asian diasporic woman, and I carry the film’s moments deeply with me today. Needless to say, I was shocked to learn of the complete absence of South Asian women in football.

As the author states, several of the reasons why South Asian women are not involved in football include “limited access to teams and facilities, lack of role models that you can connect with and aspire to be like and lastly, the way that society sees South Asian women: often through stereotypes.” The article also talks about how the role of the South Asian family influences predominantly professional career choices, and how biases that South Asian people are not predisposed to football can hinder progress.

When describing solutions to this issue, so many of the women footballers who were interviewed described the power of community. I really resonated with one footballer’s notion that, “[a] community of champions is desperately needed in order to continue to push for cultural change.” Although I do not play football, there have been so many moments in which feeling visible through tangible models has led me to think that I was capable of something I had never dreamed about before. In the realm of sports, I can imagine that the power of a collective functions in the exact same way.
In the midst of August’s embrace in 2009, the world’s gaze converged upon an athlete whose gender had become a captivating enigma. Viewers were enthralled as they pored over their TV screens studying the woman now rumored to be a man. At the heart of this captivating scrutiny stood Caster Semenya, an 18-year-old South African who had unwaveringly lived as a woman. Her name resonated with both admiration and controversy, as she soared to a gold medal triumph in the 800-meter World Championship in Athletics, a mere breath away from eclipsing Kelly Holmes’ legendary record.

Yet, amidst the applause that echoed throughout Africa, a dissonant chord of ridicule and skepticism played its tune. Detractors questioned her physical prowess and stature, finding it unconventional. Media amplified this discourse, casting doubt upon her "masculine build," "dominant performance," "deep voice," and "man-like style of running.” The voices of dissent grew louder, with prominent figures like Italy’s Elisa Cusma Piccione branding her a man, while Russia's Mariya Savinova disparaged her appearance, urging all to "just look at her.”[1]

Regrettably, the triumph of this remarkably talented athlete was ephemeral. On the very day of her victory, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) (now World Athletics) requested that she undergo a battery of tests, encompassing genetic, gynecological, psychological, and endocrine assessments, all falling under the contentious banner of "gender verification“ testing. Their aim? To pass judgment on her eligibility to compete among women.

I must admit, I do not possess the prowess of an athlete – running, jumping, and kicking are not within my repertoire of abilities. My only foray into the realm of sports occurred during my adventurous journey to South Africa in 2010, to witness the grand spectacle of the FIFA World Cup, as Ghana had earned its rightful place in the tournament. The singular match I witnessed was the clash between Ghana and the United States, an experience deserving of its own chronicle, yet for another time.

The narrative I present here is one imbued with the perspective of a staunch advocate for women’s rights. Through the lens of Caster Semenya’s case, I endeavor to illuminate the intricate interplay of race, gender, and the world of sports.

Returning to the case of Caster Semenya, it is imperative to recognize that the IAAF’s gender verification test has historical echoes. Turning the pages of history, we encounter gender exclusion from the world of sports. In the annals of ancient Greece, women were forbidden not only from competing in sports but even from spectating, under penalty of death.

Pausanias, the intrepid traveler, bore witness to an exception, Kallipateira. She, from the storied lineage of Diagoras of Rhodes, disguised herself as a male trainer to secure her son’s entry into the arena of competition. When victory graced her son, the mask slipped leading to her inadvertent exposure. Remarkably, Pausanias recounts that, despite the prevailing strictures, Kallipateira was ultimately spared severe consequences, due to her family’s esteem.[2] This historical backdrop serves as a poignant reflection of the enduring complexities entwining gender, tradition, class and the world of sports, resonating far beyond the annals of ancient Greece and into the modern-day discourse surrounding athletes like Caster Semenya.
Due to the historical association of physicality and maleness, whispers of ambiguously sexed female athletes and men posing as women for athletic success surfaced almost from the onset of women’s inclusion in sport. Particularly, the IOC Medical Commission’s initial concern centered on male imposters in women’s competitions, prompting gender verification tests.[3] The specter of male impostors served to reinforce the perception of male superiority. The notion that any man could simply don a wig or a skirt and effortlessly triumph over female competitors not only perpetuated the image of sports as an exclusive male arena but also undercut the recognition of women’s exceptional abilities and aptitudes in the realm of athletics. As the IOC grappled with the complexity of defining a clear sex divide, and faced issues of doping among female athletes, the focus shifted. The test transitioned from discerning sex to enforcing gender normativity. This transformation underscored the evolving anxieties within the commission. Rather than merely detecting men posing as women, the test aimed to exclude female Olympians perceived as too strong, fast, successful, or unconventional for women’s sports. Furthermore, both the IAAF and IOC selectively targeted specific women for scrutiny, particularly those who did not conform to prevailing Western ideals of femininity, leading to further complexities in the verification process.

Western ideals of femininity etched a preference for slender, passive and graceful attributes. Conversely, the emergence of muscular physiques and assertive, powerful qualities raised concerns and posed a challenge to Western dominance in the realm of sports. Just three days after the commencement of the 1960 Rome Olympics, New York Times journalist William Barry Furlong published a lengthy article titled “Venus Wasn’t a Shot-Putter.” In this piece he bemoaned the disruption of "The Image." This image encapsulated the innate beauty associated with petite, aesthetically pleasing, and non-muscular women cherished by society. Furlong contended that girls who engaged in athletic pursuits like swimming or tennis, where graceful attire such as swimwear or tennis skirts was worn, found it easier to uphold and even enhance this cherished "Image."[4] Furlong’s disapproval of sports requiring strength and power, such as shot put, and his admiration for those emphasizing grace and skirts, like tennis, reflected the prevailing gender ideology of the Western world during that era. This ideological backdrop underscores the tension surrounding women’s participation in sports and the entrenched notions of femininity that prevailed. This perspective allowed many to view all muscular female Olympians as substance-enhanced, masculinized frauds. Such accusations not only excluded women who possessed genetic differences but also reinforced the notion that strength and power were not deemed acceptable attributes for female athletes.

Based on the assumption that sporting prowess contradicted womanhood, in 2019, the world of track and field witnessed a watershed moment as the governing body, IAAF, introduced new regulations. These rules targeted women like Caster Semenya, who naturally exhibited higher testosterone levels due to Differences of Sex Development (DSD). Under these regulations, such athletes were effectively barred from competition unless they willingly underwent medically unnecessary interventions aimed at reducing their testosterone levels. This requirement sought to align them with an arbitrary and subjective standard of femininity. While the sport’s governing bodies touted these regulations as a departure from the humiliating, degrading, and discriminatory practice of sex testing women athletes that had persisted for half a century, the revised rules still subjected women athletes to sex eligibility criteria with potential negative consequences that violated their rights. The paradox in arguments defending these human rights violations lies in the pretext of "protecting women" and "leveling the playing field."[5] Discrimination surfaces when successful women athletes face exclusion from their sports.[6] Male athletes, with their diverse testosterone levels, remain unscrutinized.[7] Take, for instance, the case of Michael Phelps, the renowned US swimmer who clinched an unprecedented eight medals during the 2012 London Olympics. Phelps seemed almost custom-engineered for aquatic excellence with his elongated torso, disproportionately long arms, short legs, size-fourteen feet, and double-jointed ankles, which granted him an astounding fifteen-degree advantage in ankle flexibility compared to his peers.
This unique physiological configuration provided him with distinct advantages in swimming. Similarly, consider the case of Nordic skier Eero Mantyranta, whose genetic condition results in the excessive production of red blood cells—a natural form of "doping" for endurance events which also provides him with a unique advantage over his peers. Strikingly, these male athletes have faced no call to curtail their advantages. IAAF has not imposed comparable regulations on them, even though their performance can likewise be influenced by inherent biological traits. The question arises, why does male excellence earn applause while female resilience and success raise doubts? In this web of sports, gender, and race, a complex and contentious issue challenges the very essence of sportsmanship.

The nexus between athleticism and masculinity is intertwined with the dynamic interplay of gender and race. Throughout history, women have experienced ridicule for their involvement in sport but black women in particular, have borne the brunt of derision for their departure from conventional white ideals of femininity.

A striking example of this phenomenon emerges from the disparities in the socioeconomic status of African American women and white women in the United States, shaped by the enduring impact of institutional racism and the legacy of slavery. Within this context, African American women often found themselves compelled to undertake arduous physical labor, a stark contrast to the portrayal of white, middle-class women, whose societal image was one of passivity, delicacy, and fragility. In this dichotomy, the canvas of athleticism and femininity was painted, influenced by the complex blend of gender and race.

This gender, racial and cultural biases underpin the controversy surrounding Caster Semenya, a black woman from the global south whose physique deviates from Western norms of femininity. The mandated physical examinations demanded by the IAAF were regarded as a deeply degrading experience. According to Wilfred Daniels, former head coach of Athletics South Africa, Caster Semenya was profoundly affected by the demeaning nature of these assessments. He vividly described the distressing scene, where Semenya found herself in a vulnerable position, her feet placed in stirrups, while photographs of her genitalia were taken.

IAAF's intrusive physical examinations, including genital photography and the relentless scrutiny of the African female body is not a new phenomenon and finds a chilling parallel in the historical exploitation of Saartjie Baartman, derogatorily referred to as the 'Hottentot Venus.' In the 19th century, Baartman was subjected to a degrading and objectifying spectacle in Europe due to her distinctive physical features, particularly her large buttocks. This asymmetry underscores the intricate intersection of gender, race, and geographic origin in the realm of sports. While the IAAF regulations claim to avoid pressuring athletes into assessments and treatments, the reality is different for athletes from disadvantaged regions. Athletes like Semenya come from backgrounds marked by adversity and economic challenges. They have built their athletic careers through determination and skill and have managed to carve out sporting careers and a source of income. Hence, in the face of threatened livelihood they are compelled to undergo invasive and medically unjustified procedures jeopardizing their rights to well-being.

The saga of Caster Semenya weaves together the threads of sex, gender, race, and the realm of sports. Her remarkable journey disrupts conventional paradigms and beckons towards a sporting landscape characterized by inclusivity and equity. It serves as a profound reminder that athletes transcend mere physical prowess, embodying multifaceted identities. It questions intersectionality—do categories like race, class, gender, and nation always reinforce each other, or do they sometimes obscure each other's complexities? For instance, a petition supporting Semenya, drafted by South African feminists representing various sectors, criticized the focus on imperialism and racism in gender testing, arguing that it detracted from addressing the underlying sexism in Semenya's treatment by politicians and the media.

In summary, feminist scholars such as Mary Jo Kane, Michael Messner, and Ann Travers shed light on the historical role of sports in perpetuating gender disparities. The rigid separation of men and women in athletic arenas perpetuates the notion of innate male physical superiority and female physical inferiority. Yet, paradoxically, Semenya's treatment underscores the urgency for sports institutions to recalibrate the boundaries of sex and gender, disentangling them from racial inequalities entrenched in sports. As sports evolve, navigating these intersecting factors becomes paramount—a quest for fairness, inclusiveness, and the unwavering respect of every athlete, irrespective of sex, gender identity, or racial heritage. It is evident that the legacy of Caster Semenya transcends her athletic feats; it resonates as a clarion call for transformation within the sporting realm.
Whether through watching sports, playing sports at any age, or hearing news related to sports, we all have a connection to the sports industry one way or another. And, especially for women’s athletes, there is often a lack of discussion about the disappointment felt from experiencing inequality. This is not a lack of discussion because the passion isn’t there; it is because we lack the vocabulary to succinctly and rationally explain the many frustrations.

The Women Law and Leadership seminar succeeds in giving us all the vocabulary and knowledge to name and identify the inequalities, stereotypes, and microaggressions that women deal with on a daily basis. For some students, the theories, readings, and stories of the seminar finally give words to the feelings and frustrations we have experienced. For others, it is an eye opening discussion that makes us all aware of the need for change. Below you will read members recount experiences they have had with women’s sports or female athletes, and how the seminar has helped them identify a greater need for leadership from the system or out of themself. As important as it is to identify and analyze the disappointments around us and the need for change in national and global systems, it is just as important to identify the smaller changes and improvements we can make in and for ourselves and those around us.
For over twenty years, the strongest part of my identity was that of an “athlete.” I took my first gymnastics lesson at eighteen months and spirited off my final cheerleading mat just a couple of years ago at twenty-two. Sports were my entire life - why I woke up at 5:30 am to lift weights at the YMCA before school, why I ate dinner in the car between volleyball practice and gymnastics - I was an athlete, through and through. However, it became clear to me, even from a young age, that my existence as an athlete was a different one than the experience of my male friends. Whereas the entire town was in the stands to watch the football team every Friday night (despite then going 3-7) or the local sports news radio show covered the league men’s basketball games and previewed the baseball season, I realized that despite my achievements, despite my efforts, my love for the game - everyone seemed a hell of a lot more concerned about what I was wearing.

With gymnastics, it was institutional. As memorialized in the 2006 cult classic Stick It: any deviation from the appropriate clean-cut appearance, namely a bra strap hanging out or underwear peaking from your already exposing leotard, was a deduction from your score - like taking points away from a basketball game. And it didn’t stop there, I recall being hounded for my “messy” hair which was “distracting” to judges, and being reminded at a certain age that makeup was expected - but not too much, just enough to look “presentable.” But hey, that’s just how gymnastics is.

Things were more confusing to thirteen-year-old me when I was prohibited from wearing the nationally accepted standard uniform as I ventured into junior high volleyball. Whether it was just the prudish old guard male athletic director or the German Catholic religious morals of my rural Ohio community sweeping in - it was shocking to learn that not only were junior high athletes prohibited from wearing spandex shorts, but high schoolers, too. I didn’t wear a spandex shorts volleyball uniform until my junior year of high school when the administration allegedly “relented” and brought my team into the 21st century and out of cackling jokes from the opposing student sections.

But where critiques and rules about what I wore became personal was when they started to have some bite. Nothing starts to suck the life out of your love for a sport like your track coach telling you and your female teammates that you can no longer wear leggings to track practice because it’s “distracting.” When the boys on the track team who run distance can rule miles through the town entirely shirtless, their half-naked teenage bodies for the world to see, but for a coach, and a female coach, to run across the stadium to scold you and your sole teammate tucked away in the corner at pole vault, that even though the unisex track shorts we were forced to wear were too baggy and uncomfortable when vaulting, that wearing black spandex was unacceptable.

And while I could write a novel about cheerleading - I’ll keep it brief. Even though I was throwing women my size in the air and catching them or running down the mat to do seven flips in a row and come up with a smile, the appearance of a female cheerleader is impossibly intertwined with any athletic ability she exhibits. Wearing sparkly, cropped uniform tops with the shortest and tightest spandex skirt - one that certainly would have given my high school athletic director a heart attack - we performed dangerous and athletic skills far beyond the rigor of many more popular sports, and yet were frequently dismissed as “not a real sport” and took the back seat behind co-ed cheerleading, which for the record, includes men who are fully covered wearing no sparkles nor red lipstick.

I wouldn’t trade my experiences in sports for the world - they made me who I am. In fact, over a year after retiring as a competitive athlete, I am still struggling to understand my identity which is no longer athlete-first, if even athlete at all. Still, it’s easy for me to see how the burdens of being a girl or a woman playing sports can push these bright young athletes away. Focusing on what women wear and how women look when playing sports is placing a hurdle between women and girls and the joy of competition and sense of belonging that comes with sports. It would do society well, in general, if people (and especially men) would stop commenting on women’s bodies and what they wear, but I believe it is integral to supporting women in sports to move the focus away from the uniform and appearance.
As captain of my college club water polo team, I tried to create a supportive and inclusive environment for everyone, regardless of gender. Our team consisted of about 60% men and 40% women. In water polo, size and strength have a good deal of influence on how competitively one can play. When we attended important league games, that difference made it hard for me, as captain, to balance the sometimes-competing needs of giving everyone playing time and putting our team in the best position to win. On dry land, our team did well to make everyone feel included as important parts of the team. We all socialized together, and most of us formed our closest college friendships on that team with women and men.

This semester, in Women, Law, and Leadership, I have reflected on my position on that team. That year the team leadership did not feature women—I was captain after all—but I still think the experience provides helpful retrospective for how male leaders can be better allies and upstanders who contribute to a more equitable culture for all, even when structural disadvantages like size and weight get in the way. One area I know our team culture presented a challenge for women was what Joan Williams calls “the tightrope”. Our female players had to demonstrate stereotypically feminine qualities in social situations, while exhibiting stereotypically masculine ones in the pool. Sometimes, we were able to put women in positions where they were uniquely able to succeed. In these ways, we supported women as leaders. Our starting goalie was a woman. One woman who had recently quit the swim team was one of our fastest swimmers, so we used her for the “swim off” portion of the game which is exclusively a speed competition. However, these situations also presented risks of what Carmen Wunderlich calls “feel good” norm entrepreneurship, where we bias towards the norms that give us a feeling of having done good, without making actual, meaningful change. In conclusion, as captain of my water polo team, I made some important changes that supported women as leaders, but there is always more work to be done.
When I watched the movie Athlete A, it was the first time I saw the toxic culture of women’s competitive gymnastics portrayed on TV. The movie follows a team of investigative journalists as they break the story of Larry Nassar, a doctor who sexually assaulted young female gymnasts, and the subsequent allegations that engulfed USA Gymnastics.

Professor de Silva de Alwis suggested at the start of our Women, Law, and Leadership course that “sexual harassment is about power and control”. This statement is very true in the context of women’s gymnastics, and the power is with the coaches and medical professionals that work with gymnasts to train and rehabilitate them. Therefore, it is devastating when these powerful figures take advantage of their roles and ultimately force women out of the game.

As a gymnast growing up, I experienced tremendous sexism and the harsh impact of female stereotypes, mainly imposed by male coaches. I vividly remember my male gymnastics coach death staring me at practice because I towered over the other girls. According to my coach, I was “too tall”, “too fat”, my “boobs were too big”, and “I was never going to win first place at a meet looking like that”. So, as any gymnast can imagine, I was stuck climbing the rope as a punishment for the way that I looked. At just 9 years old, I was being sexualized and objectified by the person in power who was supposed to support and protect me in my athletic journey. From speaking with other ex-gymnasts over the years, I realized that my negative experience was not uncommon, which underscores the need for change. When I think about what it means to “put women back in the game”, it involves creating supportive and safe conditions where female athletes can pursue their passions and fulfill their potential without fear of being sexualized and sexually harassed. Women will not achieve full equality until they have the same support and respect as their male counterparts when playing sports.
I write this piece as a testament to myself, my fortitude, and my tenacity, but mostly as a reminder that the greatest ability I have as a former Division I athlete and as a female leader is to be both retrospective and introspective on my disheartening experience. So much of me today wishes I could have been more, that I could go back and fulfill the destiny of the athlete I was meant to become but was taken from me. I recall the shame and isolation, so that my guard never drops. I remember the pain that seized my heart and clouded my mind, so that I never again fall into the same despair. I wish I could say that the attempts to debilitate me didn’t in fact do so, and that I could have been stronger in retaliating against those who stripped me down to my most vulnerable self – but I cannot. But now, I recall, remember, and endure, so that my future daughter never has to feel the same.

**Lesson 1: Empowerment is not a dormant, inanimate thing – it is something that must be used intentionally to bring the greatness out in others.**

Approximately eight years ago, I embarked on my collegiate athletic career as a goalkeeper on the University of Pennsylvania’s varsity field hockey team. As with many incoming athletes, I felt a strong sense of pride for my school, especially as the first in my family to attend an Ivy League institution, and the sense that here, at Penn, I had the opportunity to reveal my untapped greatness. Over time, it has become a standard practice for women’s teams in the NCAA to pride themselves on “female empowerment.” It is the eye-catching, surface-level vision that attracts so many on the outside, yet serves as catalyst for mental illness on the inside due to the incompetency of coaches to effectively implement the foundations necessary for these feelings to develop and grow. We often forget that to feel powerful we must be empowered, and those in superior positions can reclaim that power so that those below can never reach it. The term “empowerment” does not just exist – it is only lifeless until one gives it life; it is an active concept that can be easily manipulated and exploited by the egotist. Thus, it is only the greatest coaches, the ones who do not desire power for themselves but hope to instill powerful feelings in others, that inspire greatness in their athletes.

While at Penn, there was no such motivation. My female coach dangled “empowerment” in front of me like a pendulum clock, but it was always unattainable, or looking back, maybe it was never truly there at all. I was supposed to feel “empowered” like the rest of my teammates, which I know now was as much a façade as any, but instead felt helpless, depressed, and suicidal. My coach used her self-proclaimed power to strip me of my own. Woman to woman, she deliberately wore me down, suspecting every weakness and embellishing every mistake. I would work hard and do better just to realize that I was further than I was the day before. I realize now, several years removed, that empowerment is an animated quality that can be given, just as easily as it can be taken away; it can be as much a gift as it can a weapon. It is the downfall of many women’s sports teams that creates a false sense of hope and identity and leaves us only to rebuild with what remains.

**Lesson 2: Leaders earn respect. Idolizing is not equivalent to earning but is instead a self-inspired fantasy that only temporarily fills the same gap of trust and admiration.**
From this experience, I no longer wait for change, but I am the change. I no longer idolize those who have not earned their place or who have ignorantly been given power and use it at another’s expense. Omnipotence is not omniscience. But where there is death, there is always rebirth. My journey was not quite over yet.

**Lesson 3: Informed leadership is powerful leadership. Those that have endured hardship have the capability and duty to impact the world by recreating what leadership means.**

I often think of Teddy Roosevelt, the man who saved my life. “It is not the critic who counts; not the [woman] who points out how the strong [woman] stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.” While I desperately read these words as an athlete, I now reread them with a new perspective. It was never my coach or her opinion that mattered, nor is it my place to look back and wish for a better experience. Instead, my purpose is to be a force for change; to inspire other future female leaders to find greatness within themselves that no one person can destroy. As a former high school field hockey coach and a future lawyer, I have been given the opportunity to craft a new identity and a chance to decide for myself how my pain will affect me moving forward. And from that, I have chosen to become the leader for others who I had expected my own leader to be. “The credit belongs to the [woman] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming... who spends [herself] in a worthy case...and who, if [she] fails, at least fails while daring greatly.” I strove valiantly, I dared greatly, and I came up short. Again and again and again. But I spent myself in the worthiest cause there is: discovering the impactful leader I was destined to be. I have chosen a path not free of adversity nor one that I can conquer without a struggle, but one that fulfills both me and the athlete I left behind.

At the time I felt most disempowered was when my journey to self-discovery began. Gradually, with time and maturity, the dark moments I faced as an athlete have both consciously and subconsciously regrown into my foundations as a leader. As hard as I have tried, I do not think I will ever forget, but these memories will continue to inspire my vision of transformational leadership to ultimately break this vicious cycle in women’s sports.
When we had the opportunity to interview Megha Parekh, the Jaguars' Senior Vice President and Chief Legal Officer, in class this semester, she recapped her own experience with sports and how it was way more than just a game, but symbolized something much larger: “Sports was a way for me, not that I was any good at it, a common cultural tool to facilitate conversation with people who were different from me. Things that people love talking about- are sports and music. Used as a tool to build connections and conversations with people.” In other words, sports do provide the opportunity for women to use their voices to make a change in many other facets of the game. Sports offer a platform to foster gender equality and empower women and girls. It helps shape people’s attitudes toward women’s capabilities as leaders and decision-makers in traditionally male-dominated industries. Especially as we think about transformational leadership, it’s interesting to think about the skill sets developed in navigating a competitive male-heavy environment while leveraging a woman’s ability to be compassionate; specifically, the ability to advocate her agenda while balancing those that may go against her own yet maintaining a sense of logic and fairness.

The Women’s Sports Foundation, founded by the iconic athlete Billie Jean King, states that “through sports, girls learn the important life skills such as teamwork, leadership, and confidence”. However, while countless women seeking leadership positions in professional sports are tremendously qualified and experienced, they have too often been brushed aside as teams have followed the traditional path and hired male leaders for the positions. Striving to “Put women back in the game” is no easy task, as too many team presidents or executive leaders do not truly give women a fair, equal opportunity to win an opening coaching or managerial gig. However, As women strive to make it to the top, they are often confronted with barriers that their male counterparts do not have to face. And only in providing women with the opportunities in these positions will we begin to see a closer version of equal rights for women and men.

Over the last several years, there have been certain milestones in professional sports that provide optimism that a future of women leaders could take over certain professional sports. One team in particular has broken barriers: Angel City Football Club (“Angel City”) is a professional women’s soccer team, formed in July of 2020, and it’s ownership is comprised of two thirds women, the largest majority-female owned professional sports team.[2] Also in July of 2020, Alyssa Nakken became the first woman to coach during an MLB game, six years after she was hired by the team to be a baseball operations intern.[3] Then, in September of 2020, in a National Football League game between the Cleveland Browns and the Washington Football Team,
for the first time ever, three women were on the football field in an official capacity, as each team had one female coach, to go along with one female official for the game.[4] And finally, in November of 2020, Kim Ng was named the general manager of the Miami Marlins, becoming the first female General Manager in the history of all major North American men’s pro team sports.[5] Ng had interviewed over 10 times for General Manager positions over the previous several years and was always rejected, and her hiring will hopefully bring hope to a future generation of female leaders, a potential breakthrough in men’s professional sports, one that will see more women leaders in front-office positions, rather than the traditionally-dominated male leaders. As Megha Parekh also said in the interview, “As women become in their career– sports as a way to teach little girls to become more team-oriented and more collaborative”.

However, the issue is not limited to just men’s sports teams. The Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sports did a report in 2020-21, and in analyzing the presence of female coaches for women’s teams in the NCAA, it showed that women are still the minority as head coaches even for women’s teams; in particular, for swimming, 79.5% of the coaches remain men.[6] However, despite the limited number of female leaders in defined executive positions on sports teams, female athletes have still embodied the true definition of a “leader” off the playing field. Many athletes have used their platforms as players to lead social movements and bring attention to major issues in the world (see below for a student contribution about WNBA players). And the executives that have made it have not been complacent; they have often used their platform and position to further advocate for the next generation of young leaders. Hopefully, teams will see the value in women like Ng and Nakken and encourage the hiring of more women in coaching and managerial positions. The hope is that this is just the start, and as time goes on, we hope there will be more women leaders in sports to act as role models to the young girls and teenagers out there interested in running or coaching a team. We want the stories like Ng to not be one embodying a milestone breakthrough but rather another star, a more normalized accomplishment. Teams need to start putting women back in the game by thrusting them into coaching gigs and letting them use their skills and hard work to prove the doubters wrong.
2023 marks 50 years of equal pay at the US Open, the first grand slam to pay men and women equally. It was not for 28 years that the next slam followed suit. Tennis is one of the only sports in which female viewership is equal to male viewership, and that is largely in part to the leadership of Billie Jean King, whose work is still ongoing and celebrated. Coco Gauff recognized that at this year’s US Open when she thanked Billie for her impactful efforts that have made women’s tennis the amazing sport it is today. Her work is still recognized and celebrated today. I argue that Billie Jean King (“BJK”) has set forth a new theory of leadership centered on four pillars, (i) to promote (ii) to advocate (iii) to support and (iv) to partner, that create transformational leaders who can successfully overcome prove it again bias, not only in the world of women’s sports, but the traditional workforce as well.

To Advocate

One of the pillars to become a transformational leader, as proven by BJK, is to advocate for equal pay for equal work. BJK was the first women to do so in the field of tennis, as culminated by her legendary 1973 Battle of the Sexes match against Bobby Riggs. In Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment, Again, Vicki Schultz transforms harassment of women from being beyond purely sexual, exposing how harassment of women still thrives because harassment is most commonly rooted in sexism and antiquated notions of power. It makes clear to us that, unfortunately, men that harass women do so and are not held accountable because they are high performers. The devaluation of women in the workplace, or even the tennis court, is further continued by men’s unfettered power trips. As a result, women in the workforce feel diminished which is further reflected by their exiting of jobs positions and lower pay or even less job perks for equal work. While the reading gives examples from Uber, I can think of no better example than the Battle of the Sexes Match. The match came about as a response to Riggs’ chauvinist behavior, as he described women’s tennis as inferior to men’s tennis and reasoned that it was because of women’s inferior ability that they were paid less than male players. Even at the age of 55, he claimed that he could beat the current number one female tennis player.

BJK beat him in every match, exhibiting how women can be superior to men both in grace and athleticism. This is just one instance of many where BJK was forced to succumb to prove it again bias, but in doing so, she showed the 90 million people that watched the match that women can do equal, if not better, work than men, and encouraged other women to advocated for equal pay in other fields.
This report made some interesting points we discussed in class about how the benefits of being an athlete could translate to being an effective leader. The study revealed that 94% of C-suite women have played sports and that women athletes have the advantage of thriving in competition. In particular, sports offer a platform to foster gender equality and empower women and girls. It helps shape people's attitudes toward women's capabilities as leaders and decision-makers in traditionally male-dominated industries. Especially as we think about transformational leadership, it's interesting to think about the skill sets developed in navigating a competitive male-heavy environment while leveraging a woman's ability to be compassionate; specifically, the ability to advocate her agenda while balancing those that may go against her own yet maintaining a sense of logic and fairness.

Five winning attributes

To answer these questions, we carried out in-depth interviews with women entrepreneurs from around the world, all of whom are former or current sportswomen in a range of sports and work in a variety of industries.

Our discussions with 22 entrepreneurs identified five winning strategies they developed as athletes that give them an edge in launching and scaling their own enterprises:

- **Confidence** – in their abilities, even during rough patches
- **Single-mindedness** – an unwavering focus on the challenges ahead
- **Passion** – the determination to succeed in everything they do
- **Leadership** – the ability to lead and inspire a team of likeminded individuals
- **Resilience** – the ability to take failure as “feedback” that will only make them stronger

In this report, we explore each of these attributes and suggest how they can be translated into behaviors that women can adopt to help them start, lead and grow their own companies.
Chloe Kim, a Korean American snowboarder, inspired the world when she became the youngest woman to win an Olympic snowboarding gold medal at 17 years old in the 2018 Winter Olympics. In an interview with ESPN, she shared her painful experience with receiving anti-Asian and misogynistic messages after her win.

She discussed how snowboarding is a particularly white-dominated sport and the isolation she feels among her peers. Most notably, the vitriol she has endured both online and in-person (for example, she mentioned how her mother gets catcalled even when they are together) has made her fearful for her and her family’s safety.

I chose to reflect on Chloe’s interview because it brings to light the intersectional and nuanced experience of women leaders in sports. The culmination of years of training paid off with a record-breaking success at the Olympics. However, that success necessarily thrust her into the spotlight at a tender age. The visibility and anonymity of social media, along with the rise of anti-Asian hate in the wake of COVID-19, exposed Chloe to a torrent of abuse. I grapple with the contradictions that exist for women leaders in sports – many individuals likely did not intend, especially initially, to excel in their field for advocacy reasons. Chloe said that after she won her Olympic medal, she said “was expected to speak up and be an activist. It was a lot of responsibility.” She became a leader, yet she was unfamiliar and unequipped for the task. She said, “I still don’t know how to talk about all of this…In snowboarding, all my friends are white and no one had these conversations.”

Chloe’s interview made me hope for a shift among coaches and the larger sports community to talk about the realities of being in the spotlight as a POC and/or woman. Chloe deserved better. She should have been better prepared and informed about what to expect from online comments and how to manage that process. For example, access to mentors or an Asian sports community could have made all the difference in helping Chloe feel supported and heard through an otherwise isolating experience. A mental health or wellness counselor could have taught her emotional tools to help her adapt and cope with the backlash she received as well.

Chloe ended her interview saying that now, she is proud to be Korean American. Because of her bravery in sharing her experiences with racism and sexism, she has “received so many messages from people saying they are inspired by [her] sharing what [she has] been through.” This illustrates the impact of storytelling and building new narratives in a male- and white-dominant area. I am deeply encouraged that Chloe was able to build resilience and pride in her intersectional identity, and I hope that her story continues to make a lasting impact. Ultimately, Chloe’s painful yet hopeful story exposes the ways in which the American sports community has a long way to go in supporting and celebrating women and POC athletes.
When thinking about the role of women in sports, Aly Raisman immediately came to mind. Raisman is a two-time Olympic gymnast and a member of the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. She serves as a role model for female athletes, but more specifically Jewish female athletes—Raisman won gold for a 2012 performance to the Jewish folk song “Hava Nagila.” Her intersectional identity has contributed to some very difficult experiences for her as an athlete. First, she was the victim of persistent sexual abuse by Larry Nassar: the doctor for United States women’s national gymnastics team. Second, she was the victim of many antisemitic social media attacks. As a public figure, Raisman has used her platform to fight for victims of sexual abuse and the Jewish community. Her story centers around broken trust—trust in her doctor, trust in her fans.

Raisman grew up in a culture that valued success at all costs with immense pressure. As she noted in her testimony at Nassar’s sentencing, it was easier and potentially beneficial for her career to stay quiet. The pressure to gain an Olympic spot was all-encompassing and she put trust in a system that let her down. When previous victims reported their abuse, they were told they were being “dramatic” and that Nassar was the best doctor that they were lucky to see. This sentiment is at the root of sexism in the sports arena: women being told that they are mistaken when reporting wrongdoing, and that any negative press will ruin their career. This message forces female athletes, especially with intersectional backgrounds, to be silenced. Any controversial social media post about Judaism could lose fanbase, any report of abuse could jeopardize a spot in the Olympics. Raisman is a role model for future female athletes to speak up and have their voices heard, even when warned not to by men in charge.
In a recent episode of the podcast “It’s Been a Minute,” host Brittany Luse interviewed sports journalist Katie Barnes, the author of “Fair Play: How Sports Shape the Gender Debates,” about the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA). Their conservation framed WNBA players as trailblazers in defying sex stereotypes while also using their platform to advocate for gender, racial, and LGBTQ+ equity. As Katie Barnes explained, at the WNBA’s inception in 1997, playing sports was coded as a masculine activity. To appeal to the public, the league attempted to project a hyper-feminine “Barbie girl” image onto its players, emphasizing their identity as wives and mothers. This time also coincided with the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people during the AIDS crisis, and the league wanted to dispel assumptions that its players were gay. In response, several prominent LGBTQ+ players such as Sheryl Swoopes pushed back against this hyper-feminine imagine. The first openly gay player, Sue Wicks, publicly spoke out against the league’s marketing campaign and called out the league for centering the players who were heterosexual wives and mothers. Slowly, the league has evolved from projecting a hyper-feminine stereotype of its players. According to Katie Barnes, the league is now not only more accepting of players who do not fit that mold, but also supports players in taking collective action to advance gender, racial, and LGBTQ+ justice. Today, Barnes argues that WNBA players are trailblazers for collective action and the blueprint for other sports leagues. For example, a critical mass of players—many of whom are Black women—have protested police violence against Black Americans on multiple occasions.

What struck me about this podcast episode was the entirely player-fueled evolution of the WNBA. In class, we have discussed sex stereotyping, which penalizes women who do not conform to traditional notions of femininity, such as in the famous case of Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins. Like the plaintiff in Hopkins, the players were facing sex stereotyping in their place of employment. Rather than conforming to sex stereotypes, players who did not fit those stereotypes were leaders in challenging the league’s marketing campaign. In turn, their leadership paved the way for future players to present themselves authentically. I was struck by the league’s prominent players, such as Sheryl Swoopes and Sue Wicks, leading the charge against sex stereotypes against their own league. In the present-day conversation, I was reminded of our class’s discussion of intersectionality. As Barnes explained, the majority of WNBA players are women of color, and many are openly LGBTQ+. When WNBA players took collective action to champion equitable causes, they chose to advocate for the Black Lives Matter movement (among other causes), recognizing that gender justice is impossible without also furthering racial justice. At pivotal moments in the country’s political and social climate, from the AIDS crisis to the Black Lives Matter movement to discussions regarding pay equity in sports, WNBA players have used their visibility to lead the league to shed sex stereotypes while reaching the broader public to further systemic change. Throughout the league’s history, WNBA players have acted as trailblazers for social causes, pushing for gender equity on and off the court.
Each year, Mattel chooses a “Career of the Year” for their Barbie doll collection in hopes to “inspire limitless potential in every girl by taking on culturally relevant and aspirational roles in fields where women are underrepresented.” In 2023, the year in which the Barbie Movie became the 14th highest-grossing film of all time, Mattel chose “Women in Sports” as their career of the year. The line of four dolls that Mattel released includes a general manager Barbie, coach Barbie, referee Barbie, and sports reporter Barbie. I believe that this recognition of the importance of women who currently work in sports, as well as encouraging young girls to pursue a career in sports, reflects the overall trend of putting women into a sector that has typically been male dominated. In an article published by Forbes, this new collection of dolls comes at a time when just 16.7% of sports editors are women, there is only one female general manager across the MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL, and there are currently 15 female coaches in the NFL. This new collection has been highly praised by current women in the field like Dr. Jen Welter, the first female coach in the NFL and the first woman to play running back in men’s professional football. Dr. Welter says “girls...have to be given that opportunity to believe they can be in these positions previously reserved for men.” Mattel and Barbie are also teaming up with VOICEINSPORT, a community that “connects and inspires girls through sports” to host a virtual mentoring session to encourage twelve and thirteen-year-old girls to pursue a career in sports. Overall, Mattel’s recognition of the importance of having women involved in sports marks a big turning point in making women more visible in the community and raising them up into critical leadership positions.
I found Grace Chenxin Liu's research on "Breaking the Barriers in Women’s Fencing: Historical Roots, Title IX, and Empowerment of Women" to be very interesting. I will likely use it as the topic for my final paper.

Fencing was one of the original nine sports included in the inaugural Olympic Games of 1896. However, the inclusion of women in fencing was a long and challenging journey due to societal stereotypes against women in sports and the perceived aggressiveness of fencing. Historical, social, cultural biases, financial constraints, and a lack of leadership hindered women’s participation in fencing until the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in the US.

Efforts to promote women's involvement in fencing began in the second half of the 19th century in North America, influenced by the suffrage movement. This movement organized women into collectives aimed at addressing the sources of their subordination. This approach successfully enabled women to assert their desire to participate in sports, particularly fencing. Around the 1870s, Thomas Monstery started training female fencers, eventually leading to its inclusion in the Olympics in the 1990s.

I began fencing when I was seven years old and later joined the varsity team in college. Fencing is unique in that a fencer's blade is considered the second-fastest moving object in sports, behind only a marksman's bullet. To defend against an opponent’s attack, fencers must develop physical strength, confidence in their footwork, offensive and defensive strategies, bold moves, and self-assuredness. Traditionally, these characteristics were associated with a masculine image.

However, I believe that the nature and rules of fencing competitions have provided me with valuable opportunities to develop a range of traits that contribute to success. Participating in this fiercely competitive sport has helped me build courage, self-reliance, self-esteem, teamwork skills, confidence, strategic thinking, and resilience in the face of losses. I have directly applied these qualities to my life, giving me the courage to assume leadership positions and advocate for my values.
In July of 2020, Los Angeles, California got a new sports team in the form of Angel City Football Club (“Angel City”), a professional women’s soccer team. Although in many ways, the team is like others in the National Women’s Soccer League, its ownership stands out: two thirds of the team’s owners are women, making it the largest majority-female owned professional sports team. (Kemp). Venture capitalist Kara Nortman and actress Natalie Portman were inspired to lead the charge to forming the team after they heard Abby Wambach describe “how, upon winning the 2016 EPSY Icon award, she realized her fellow winners in Peyton Manning and the late Kobe Bryant would retire with millions while she would have to find a job to pay her mortgage and qualify for healthcare.” (Kemp). As they worked to assemble the founding members, Nortman and Portman prioritized diversity in terms of both demographics and skillset, “treat[ing] the project like a start-up tech company.” (Kemp). The team’s owners include sports icons like Abby Wambach and Serena Williams, as well as Hollywood actresses and other public figures. (Elder). The minority of male owners includes Reddit co-founder and husband of Serena Williams, Alexis Ohanian, three Super Bowl-winning quarterbacks, Matthew Stafford, Patrick Mahomes, and Eli Manning, as well as NBA All-Stars James Harden and Tony Parker and NHL legend P.K. Subban. (Baxter, Carp). Angel City exemplifies the benefits of a diverse, predominantly female leadership group, such as driving cultural change through role modeling and female empowerment, improving the wellbeing of employees and the community, and harnessing the power of creative thinking to increase profitability.

Angel City’s leaders break down stereotypes and contribute to generational change by acting as role models for aspiring male and female athletes alike and creating opportunities to empower girls. The team’s founders were motivated by a desire to expand representation of women in sports, both on the field and in the ownership, as a means of combatting sexism both in sports and in society at large.
As Portman explains, when her young son watched the 2019 Women’s World Cup, he celebrated the players “‘with the same admiration and passion and fandom as he did with the mens’ players.’” (Kemp). Portman recounts: “‘I was like ‘this is culture change. This is it.’ If our boys look up to women like that, that’s how everything changes.’” (Kemp). Although Portman was never an athlete or sports fan as a child, she decided to build a team that would accelerate the cultural change she thought sports had the power to create. (Elder). Other owners felt similarly, such as the Saffords, who felt that being part of the team would have a positive influence on their daughters, who grew up in the “hyper-masculine NFL but had not been exposed to women’s sports.” (Baxter). Women’s soccer legend Abby Wambach also speaks to the power of showing girls that their potential in sports is limitless, posting on Instagram: “I could only dream of playing pro sports. Now, little girls will dream of owning and running sports franchises.” (Armstrong).

Participating in sports can benefit girls’ future careers, but the industry is plagued by sexism. One study estimated that 93% of women in the C-suite played sports. (Victorian). However, female professional athletes on the whole are nowhere near as well-resourced or celebrated as their male counterparts. One example of the disparities between male and female sports is in the way they are talked about. Sports announcers generally use less colorful language and deliver their commentary in a flatter tone when discussing women’s sports, and in the media, men are “two to three times more likely than women to be mentioned in a sporting context, while women are disproportionately described in relation to their marital status, age or appearance.” (Fink 67). As a result of the skewed coverage, female athletes generate less attention and earn less revenue from endorsement deals. (Fink 69). Even worse, stereotypes are powerful enough to negatively impact female athletes’ performance. (Fink 69).

Because there are fewer female leaders in the sports industry, women lack valuable mentorship opportunities and are thus even less likely to succeed in the field. In addition to serving as mentors to their female subordinates, female executives can serve as a silent signal of an organization’s female-friendly culture and characteristics, which in turn “provide[s] legitimacy for other women to step into leadership positions, both by diluting existing stereotypical views of women and by contributing to a more favorable view of women as leaders.” (Fink 93–94).
The presence of female leaders also reduces tolerance for sexism within the organization. In the absence of such role models, organizations may be hesitant to promote women, and women may “assume that they are not capable of achieving greater power because they have no example upon which to base such an ambitious path.” (Fink 95).

Female leadership in the sports industry also has the power to reduce implicit gender biases among male sports professionals and nurture male allyship. (Fink 100). As Professor de Alwis de Silva notes, “[h]ealthy cross-gender work relationships are the key to allowing women’s voices to be heard and allowing women to rise in the professional ranks.” (de Alwis de Silva 109). Men can play an essential role in including women in male-dominated spaces, amplifying their perspectives, and confronting perpetrators of inequality. (de Alwis de Silva 114). Exposure to female leaders can help men in the sports world grow not only into bystanders, but into upstanders who take active steps to correct injustice. (Hornick).

Angel City’s diverse leadership also contributes to improved working conditions for athletes and generates positive impacts for the community as a whole. From the beginning, the team’s owners were passionate about improving working conditions and pushing for equal pay for female athletes. (Kemp). In addition to giving players fair wages, such as by making Christen Press, the first player to sign onto the team, one of the highest paid athletes in the league, they took a major, innovative step by giving the players a percentage of the revenue from ticket sales. (Yuccas). Angel City also prioritizes player safety and gives players resources to prepare for their careers after they retire from the field. (Yuccas). In addition to putting male and female athletes on a more even playing field, creating opportunities for women to earn fair wages and have safe working conditions enhances their abilities to combat inequality even within their own families. (Lee).

Angel City’s philosophy also includes giving back to the community the team represents. In the first two years of the team’s existence, it sponsored about 250 community service events per year, and the team donates 10% of all revenue from sponsorships. (Kemp). For each ticket sold, the team worked with Nike to donate sports bras to underprivileged girls hoping to play sports. (Armstrong). By pairing female leadership in the organization with community service, the team hopes to maximize its impact.
A diverse ownership group also reduces abuse in the organization, both by creating ample opportunities for women to succeed and thus reducing animosity among women in the industry (often called “Queen Bee Syndrome”), but also by making athlete safety a priority. Combatting gender based violence and abuse is at the core of the team’s mission, as the founding members were previously involved in the related Time’s Up movement in the entertainment industry. (Kemp). Unfortunately, women’s sports is no less prone to abuse, as an independent investigation found that emotional abuse and sexual misconduct were systemic in the National Women’s Soccer League, affecting a number of teams. (Associated Press). In 2021, five of the ten head coaches in the league were either fired or resigned due to allegations of misconduct. (Associated Press, ESPN). One player alleges that many players’ complaints to the league did not result in investigations or precautionary measures, and that the league’s player handbook contained “nothing about player protection.” (Associated Press, Linehan). Many believe that the lack of resources for women’s sports created a culture in which players were unable to speak out against abuse because “[a]s the sport tried, failed, and tried again to gain traction in the United States, any controversy was viewed as a threat to the sport’s existence, with the potential to shut down a team or even an entire league.” (Linehan). Retired player Julie Foudy, an owner of Angel City, speaks to the difference female-led ownership can make: “It’s a completely different mindset and approach. Instead of feeling like we should just be grateful to have a league, and accept things as they are…Angel City approaches all decisions with this mentality of, ‘How can we build this into something amazing for the players and for our community.’” (Elder).

Finally, Angel City demonstrates how diversity among an organization’s owners can lead to enhanced financial success because the inclusion and amplification of diverse perspectives results in more creative business ideas. Women are often drivers of innovation in the workplace because they tend to excel at collaboration and often “tackle problems with a perspective that… fundamentally differs from that of their male colleagues, and therefore can see solutions that might not appear to men.” (Fink 90, Rhode 3). Women have often utilized these skills to succeed in male-dominated fields. For example, early black female lawyers, such as Sadie Alexander, built their careers outside of the traditional industry support networks by leveraging their connections outside of industry stakeholders. (Mack 1409-1410).
Additionally, studies show that including diverse perspectives in decision-making groups expands the range of alternatives considered and prevents group think. (Rhode 3-4). Such diversity often improves business outcomes. For example, for law firms and Fortune 500 companies, having more women in management positions is associated with higher profitability, and the diversification of union representatives has increased the number of perspectives represented in union negotiations. (Rhode 4, Lee). As Sanjay Sarma notes, monochromatic companies are “driving blind,” and as a result, often fail to meet market demands. (Sarma).

The benefits of diverse leadership drive Angel City’s success. Nortman discovered the untapped potential for profit in women’s soccer when she attended the 2015 Women’s World Cup final and realized she could not find a jersey with the name of her daughter’s favorite player, Meghan Klingenberg, to purchase. (Cuttler). Nortman utilized her venture capital experience and collaborated with players, actors, and business executives to create “a new model for women’s sports teams that placed empowerment and equity at the center.” (Cuttler). Because most women’s sports teams are not financially lucrative, rather than working with sports industry veterans, the team’s founders “intentionally didn’t bring hardcore sportspeople onboard” to avoid being limited to traditional models. (Carp). They were determined to show other leaders in the field that a business that treats players fairly could still be profitable and prove that if given the same resources, women’s teams could be just as successful as their male counterparts. (Cuttler, Victorian).

This combination of passion and diverse skillsets led the group to one of their most groundbreaking decisions, in which they begin to give players a percentage of ticket proceeds. The founders noticed that the “fandom has shifted to a point where [fans] follow a player first, a team second and a league third” and determined that because fans were so attached to the players, it was more valuable to incentivize players to promote ticket sales than to invest in other forms of advertising. (Victorian). The strategy “also empowers players to be a part of the solution to drive to pay equity and empowers fans” to make a difference by contributing to players’ income by purchasing tickets. (Victorian).
Although the team didn’t turn a profit in its first season (in fact no team in the league has done so), the team expects to turn a profit in the next three to five years and has plenty to be proud of. (Baxter). Angel City has more than 16,000 season-ticket holders, $45 million in sponsorship deals, and was valued at $115 million in April 2021, before it had even played a game or signed a player, more than twice as much as any team in the league’s history. (Baxter).

By expanding the availability of female role models in sports, both on the field and in the owners’ suite, promoting male allyship, empowering the community, and employing the benefits of diverse leadership to demonstrate the profitability of women’s sports, Angel City’s owners prove the merits of a new style of leadership focused on diversity, representation, mentorship, and empowerment. The team’s leaders hope to build on the team to create a global brand that could apply their leadership style to create change in other sports or industries. (Carp). Hopefully, women and men in a wide variety of industries will benefit from the fruits of their labor as gender stereotypes give way to gender equality.
Looking Forward...
For over one hundred years, women’s pro hockey has languished in North America. Unlike their male counterparts, firmly ensconced in the popular and profitable National Hockey League (NHL) and its subsidiary minor leagues, female hockey players have historically been relegated to college competition, amateur associations, or, for the lucky few, the Canadian and American national teams. Even with the eventual establishment of the semi-pro Canadian Women’s Hockey League (CWHL) in 2007 and the pro National Women’s Hockey League (NWHL) in 2015 (later renamed the Premier Hockey Federation (PHF)), the discrepancy between the men’s and the women’s game has remained, exacerbated by the competition between the two women’s leagues. While male hockey players are paid salaries in the range of hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars and given access to state-of-the-art rinks, extensive support staff, and myriad extra perks, their female compatriots have struggled to even make a living pursuing a career in hockey, with many players receiving stipends instead of salaries and working second jobs to pay the rent. Recently, however, with the imminent 2024 launch of the new Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL), there has been some hope of real change. By recognizing the pervasive gender discrimination and machismo in hockey which historically played a role in tamping down women’s professional hockey aspirations, the PWHL and the hockey world as a whole can learn from the mistakes of the past and raise women’s hockey to a new level.

When ice hockey first gained popularity in the mid-to-late 1800s, it was among men and women alike. Together and separately, they watched the game, played the game, and promoted the game, eventually securing its establishment as one of the major sports of North America. Yet the early role of women in hockey has been largely forgotten. For example, while the impact of Lord Stanley, the governor-general of Canada from 1888–1893, in promoting and establishing hockey in Canada is well-documented and often discussed, less attention has been paid to his hockey-loving daughter, Isobel, who did as much to promote the sport among women as her father did among men. A photo from around 1890 shows her on the ice with a group of other women at Rideau Hall engaged in a game of hockey, apparently a regular pastime for her and her friends. There is speculation that this is the first recorded image of women playing hockey. In an era where hockey was more likely to take the form of community pick-up games on ponds rather than team matches in arenas, women were a common presence on the ice.
In the late 1890s and early 1900s, hockey became more structured, with cohesive rules and the formation of teams and leagues. Women were as much a part of this development as were men. While the US saw the rise of light-hearted hockey clubs in areas as diverse as Alaska, Massachusetts, and North Dakota, the bulk of the more serious ventures occurred in Canada. There was Lady Isobel Stanley’s Government House Team facing off against the Rideau Rink ladies team in an 1889 game seen by some as Canada’s first women’s hockey match. There were the Love-Me-Littles, the first female “club team,” formed in 1894 at Queen’s University. There was even Quebec’s women’s hockey league, the first of its kind, started in 1900 and boasting teams from Montreal, Quebec City, and Trois-Rivières. By 1915, organized women’s hockey in the form of both clubs and leagues was well-established throughout Canada and growing in popularity. The US was soon to follow.

With the advent of World War I, systems of belief shifted and a new image for women began to emerge, replacing the Victorian ideal of a meek and frail woman. This new image, built upon the advances of women in education and labor markets, prized the “strenuous woman,” a strong and capable individual who contributed to society through “body power” and intellect rather than domesticity and charm. As the idea of the “strenuous woman” and female participation in sports went hand-in-hand, a natural consequence was a growth in community support for women’s sports, leading to the first serious, competitive women’s hockey in the United States. Unlike in Canada, where homegrown leagues had spread among various towns and communities, American women’s teams and leagues largely began in universities, including the University of Minnesota, Carleton College, and Smith College, and in commercial urban rinks, such as in New York and Boston. While some of these teams remained intramural or local, others travelled to compete and were marketed as ticketed events to the general public, generating some level of curiosity and admiration, as well as disdainful comparisons to men’s games.

In the mid-1920s, this initial golden age of competitive women’s hockey began to decline, particularly in the United States, as a result of two developments: the rise of misogynistic beliefs as to the effects of competition on women’s characters and the classification of hockey as a sport of “bloodshed and mayhem” where women’s play couldn’t be profitable. The first development – largely affecting collegiate clubs – was rooted in a concern that sports, which were seen as becoming progressively more violent and degraded, had negatively impacted college women’s personalities and moral character in a way that left them “competitive, masculine, and unbecoming.” Fearful that women’s access to sports would be curtailed in light of this rising misogynistic fear, women’s sports leaders decided to effectively separate sports from competition, emphasizing “play for play’s sake,” ending intercollegiate competitions, and creating “girls rules” that limited “masculine” play. As a sum, these changes effectively ended competitive hockey at the collegiate level, pushing interested players into urban leagues as the last remaining option.
Unfortunately, however, this option was also soon foreclosed, as the owners of the urban arenas began to see hockey as a moneymaking spectacle, dependent on a distinctly male version of the game that prized “bloodshed and mayhem” as a way to draw crowds and earn a profit. Women’s hockey, which to this day bans bodychecking and lacks the fights so popular in the NHL, failed to fit this mold and was declared unprofitable. Deprived of ice time and community support, the urban leagues soon folded. While women’s hockey in Canada held on through the 1930s, the beginning of World War II brought nearly all remaining women’s leagues to a halt. Changing, more conservative social perspectives on women and their role in sports solidified this exclusion following the war, and women’s hockey would remain dormant for decades.

It wasn’t until the second half of the twentieth century that the pendulum would begin to swing back the other direction, starting slow and picking up speed as time went on. In the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of the women’s liberation movement and a growing interest in women’s sports led to a proliferation of women’s hockey clubs at universities across the United States and Canada, providing a solid base of talent and organization for later developments. Outside organizations, such as the 1975 Ontario Women’s Hockey Association, were also established, and the experiences of these more local hockey associations led to the creation of national leagues and national championships in a number of countries, including Canada and Finland in 1982 and Sweden in 1984. The true tipping point, however, was the advent of a series of international competitions, beginning with the Women’s World Championships in 1987, continuing with the IIHF European Women’s Championship in 1989, reaching new peaks with the IIHF Women’s Worlds in 1990, and culminating in the addition of women’s hockey to the Olympics at Nagano in 1998.

Despite all of these advances, however, and despite the success the success of the American and Canadian women’s national teams (the two nations have won gold and silver in nearly every international competition that has been held), the establishment of professional hockey leagues for women in North America has lagged behind, with the two major efforts to do so proving substandard, particularly in comparison to the men’s NHL. The first, the Canadian Women’s Hockey League (CWHL) was established in 2007 as a Canadian women’s senior league. The CWHL, which remained active for twelve years before folding in 2019, would cover the costs of travel, ice rental, uniform costs, and some equipment, but it did not pay its players until 2017, when it provided maximum stipends of between $2,500 and $10,000 per player. When it ceased operations, the league was in direct competition for players and fans with a rival league, the National Women’s Hockey League (NWHL). The NWHL, which later came to be known as the Premier Hockey Federation (PHF), was founded in 2015 and ceased operations in 2023 with the advent of the Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL). While the NWHL did pay its players, it nevertheless faced many critiques. Players described it as “not sustainable” and felt it “[didn’t] have [their] best interests in mind,” while the media noted its lack of transparency on finances, particularly its failure to disclose budget or revenue and its refusal to publicly identify many of its investors.
These compounding concerns came to a head with the folding of the CWHL, at which point many of the NWHL players joined their Canadian compatriots in a boycott, refusing to play for any North American professional women’s hockey league until a sustainable league could be established.

The Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL), it is hoped, will be the answer, and there is tentative optimism that things will be different this time. The League, which intends to launch six teams – Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, New York, Boston, and Minnesota – in 2024, is entering the hockey world in a very different position from its predecessors. Notably, the PWHL will be the sole professional women’s hockey league in North America, ending the era of competing leagues which split the best players and fanbases. This has led to declarations of support from the NHL, which had been reluctant to intervene when there were multiple competing leagues in place. In terms of financial and management concerns, both issues raised with the NWHL, the PWHL also enters the market in good shape. It is currently fully funded by Dodgers co-owner Mark Walter and his wife, Kimbra, and managed by tennis legends and women’s rights activists Billie Jean King and Ilana Kloss, along with sports management great Stan Kasten. Further, the new League has signed a significant collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with the PWHL Players Association, guaranteeing players an environment conducive to a successful competitive career, including higher pay (at least six players on each team will be signed to three-year contracts of “no less than $80,000 per league year”), improved practice facilities, and better resources and support staff. While still following far below the standards of a men’s team, this is undeniably a step forward.

In the end, while there are positive signs for pro women’s hockey, there is still much progress to be made. Female hockey players have historically faced misogyny and discrimination as they pursued careers in the field, encountering obstacles their male counterparts have never had to deal with while simultaneously remaining underpaid and undervalued. Time will tell whether the PWHL can learn from these mistakes and missteps of the past and become a strong voice of support for female players, but for the moment, players and fans alike are cautiously optimistic that this will represent a turning point in women’s hockey history.
For as long as society has existed, sports have been there for us, and that has never wavered. In 1936, Adolf Hitler took charge and oversaw the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany, as World War II was unfolding, and Jesse Owens, an American track star, traveled to compete in a politically-charged, hostile environment and won four gold medals, setting three world records and dominating the Olympics, one of the most powerful sports moments in world history. Days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, President George Bush famously threw out the first pitch of the World Series game between the New York Yankees and New York Mets, in front of a sold out crowd with millions elsewhere tuning in. When the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the entire world, the NBA and NHL stars had a short hiatus before concluding their seasons in “bubbles”. Every national holiday, whether it be Thanksgiving, Christmas, or even New Years Eve and Day, athletes take the fields and courts to put on a show for the entire world to enjoy. However, while sports have often been a means of enjoyment for fans and athletes all over the world, sports have also showcased many real societal issues, including the inequalities continuously being perpetuated between males and females in their respective sports.

As our conversation with Megha Parekh, the Jaguars’ Senior Vice President and Chief Legal Officer, focused on, sports mirror culture. As an industry in focus, sports show the duality of women’s leadership today. While we have seen various women becoming world class respected athletes and sports executives, we also still have shocking incidents of sexual harassment, sexism in media, and inequality. But at the same time, sports are a tool of empowerment for women and a sounding board for women’s leadership. As evidenced by the aforementioned piece on the Professional Women’s Hockey League, there is hope for the future.

Even people who have never played sports or watched them have been exposed to sports in some sort of way and have seen the duality of them: some of the worst sexism-induced incidents, but also times where many female leaders learn their confidence. As Everett Glenn, a pioneering sports attorney and President of ESP Education & Leadership Institute, said, “Sport is calling out society for soot on its walls when sport is thoroughly covered in it. Sport not only mirrors life, it amplifies it… There is power in unity and only by coming together can sport or society tackle the issues that challenge both”.

We are at a time in society when women need to be put back in the game and left in the game. Every time a female athlete reports a coach or executive for sexual harassment, it must be addressed immediately and with significant consequences. When female athletes need funding for new uniforms or locker rooms, they should not have to rely on a GoFundMe or their own fundraising efforts to make the dream work. When female athletes achieve personal accomplishments or shatter team or world records, it should be front-page news, just like it would be for male athletes. Only when society recognizes female athletes as truly equal will we see women not being “Put back in the game” but “IN the game”. And that will be the time when we see improvements in many other areas of our world, as sports truly do mirror culture and it would be a significant step forward.
PUTTING WOMEN BACK IN THE GAME

WOMEN, LAW & LEADERSHIP
Harassment and Inequality Part 1

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Sports and Leadership in Action Part 5


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