

The rise and rise of women in sport!

BY MARCO FLOREALE¹

Introduction

The rise in the popularity of women's sport is finally showing signs of closing the gap on men both in terms of parity of pay and sponsorship opportunities. However, there is still a huge chasm in sports where women are a long way from the rewards and recognition received by their male counterparts.

Are we doing enough, both on and off the field of play, to close this gap? What more can we do to achieve a "level playing field"?

If we travel back in time to the 90s, Anna Kournikova, through some clever marketing, was the unofficial face for women's tennis. She was not necessarily as well known for her prowess on the court. In fact, out of the 16 Grand Slam tournaments played between 1996 to 1999, her greatest success on the court was as a losing semi-finalist at Wimbledon in 1997. Estimates value her at £ 50 million, very little of which came from playing tennis.

At the same time, over on the men's Tour, a certain Pete Sampras was dominating the sport. Estimates value him at US\$ 150 million. Sampras is the fifth highest earner in ATP history, having earned over US\$ 43.2 million in wins alone during his career.

Sampras' status as a legendary tennis player no doubt contributed significantly to his off-court earnings from sponsorships and endorsements. Despite his mastery of the game, having won 14 grand slams, the difference in earnings between male and female athletes is still noticeable in mainstream sports. This has remained true up until today, with a few rare exceptions.

Nearly thirty years since Kournikova was selling a lifestyle, we finally get to a place where we celebrate women for their sporting achievements. Media coverage of women's sport is better than ever. Many sportswomen are household names for their performances in their chosen sport. Some women are heralded as sporting icons. Pay and sponsorship deals have increased. But the women are still a long way behind their male counterparts.

This article will consider why men and women are still

not financially rewarded equally from tournaments, sponsorships, and endorsements. It will also discuss the opportunities given to both genders and explain why the situation is changing. Additionally, it will highlight the positive and sustainable future ahead.

The money factor

The gender pay gap, which is not just limited to sport, is one of the most globally recognised disparities between men and women. It is particularly stark in the world of sport where there are huge prizes, salaries, and bonuses for men. Because of the mind-bendingly large amounts of money, these differences are more apparent than in the world of sport.²

According to *Forbes*³, in 2023, there is only one woman in the list of the 50 highest paid professional athletes: Serena Williams – at number 49. Her total earnings in 2022 were US\$ 45.3 million. She earned just US\$ 0.3 million of that on the sports field. Contrast that with the highest earner, Cristiano Ronaldo who earned US\$ 136 million, US\$ 46 million on the sports field.

Having worked with, and been involved in sponsorship of professional sportswomen, the writer can attest to witnessing that female athletes not only earn significantly less, but in many circumstances, they need a second job in order to make a living. Unless the athlete is at the very top of a well-publicised and heavily marketed sport, professional sport rarely pays sportswomen enough to enable them to focus solely on their performance. This impacts on their availability to train and participate in competitions. Many professional sportswomen use their annual leave whilst in full time work to attend competitions. In many cases, the lack of a sustainable salary or other benefits can lead to the athlete having to give up their dreams and leave the sport they love.

The domino effect does not stop there. Women do not have a level-playing field in terms of career chances which would lead them, in turn, to greater earnings and sponsorship. If the money was there, then women could give up their second jobs.

² Sportingintelligence, *Global Sports Salaries Survey 2017*, available at <https://globalsportssalaries.com/GSS%202017.pdf> (accessed 26 November 2023).

³ Brett Knight, "Why Only One Woman Made The Ranks Of The World's 50 Highest-Paid Athletes", in: *Forbes*, 16 May 2023, available at www.forbes.com/sites/brettknight/2023/05/16/why-only-one-woman-made-the-ranks-of-the-worlds-50-highest-paid-athletes (accessed 26 November 2023).

¹ Associate solicitor and head of Sports Law Division, Wollens, Torquay, United Kingdom. E-mail: Marco.Floresale@wollens.co.uk.

The global impact and visibility of women's sport at the top level is growing; the triad of the audience, sponsors, and athletes, which is essential to the existence and future growth of women's sport is emerging, but it needs energy and momentum to propel it forward, building on some of the excellent progress made in the last few years. It needs all three things to thrive.

But what comes first? How do you attract money? Well, the media attracts money. But you need money to put on a show worth watching, and an audience that wants to watch. Bring on the money and it stands to reason that many of the financial issues would cease to exist. – It is a chicken and egg debate – i.e., what comes first? The money or the sport? The writer contends that money follows sport in today's world and the halcyon days of players getting the train down to Wembley on match day with the fans almost seem like a Hollywood story and not reality less than 100 years ago. What women's sport needs is big backers. Companies and entrepreneurs who can afford to take the risk and pump money in to bring recognition, credibility, and fans. It is not enough to just put money in and hope for the best though. Sport needs big personalities and champions to beat the drum and call on other women to join them; it needs to nurture young talent and create a space where talented women can train and compete as a career. It needs everyone to see women's sport for what it is – the highest performers, the most competitive athletes, and the entertainers.

With money and professionalism, athletes need to build teams around them to support them. Not just coaches, nutritionists, physiotherapists, psychotherapists, and so on, but agents, lawyers, accountants, and trusted advisers. All these professionals can play a part in supporting women's sport and creating a sustainable pathway and partnership for the longevity of an athlete's career. Long into the future, when it really is time to retire, these women will be able to look back and see that the future of their chosen sport is secure, and that no talented athlete will be forced out of sport through lack of appropriate pay.

Slowly, things are changing for the better. A study in 2017⁴ showed that a total of 83% of sports reward men and women with equal prize money. By contrast, in 2014 the percentage of sports that rewarded men and women with equal prize money was 70%. An increase of 13% in three years supports the contention that the gap is narrowing, and women are on the rise. There is still a long way to go, but there are definitely positive signs.

4 Anna Thompson and Kate Kopczyk, "Women's Sport Week 2017: Gender prize money gap narrowing, new study shows", in: *BBC Sport*, 19 June 2017, available at www.bbc.com/sport/40299469 (accessed 26 November 2023).

Viewing habits

Not surprisingly, as recent as 2018, a survey⁵ found that when it comes to viewing, there is strong favouritism towards male sports. The most watched women's sports were tennis, swimming and athletics. The rationale behind this is that these sports are considered to be more unisex than say football or rugby, traditionally seen as "men's sports". This is not a big surprise. Women were not allowed to participate in many professional sports until the last two decades of the 20th century. In many cases, women have only been allowed to participate in professional sport for less than fifty years. Perceptions change over the course of time and history though as women were not even allowed to participate in the first ever Olympics 1896 but by the Rio Games in 2016, 45% of the participants were women.⁶ This shows that during the last fifty years, the pace at which women's professional sport has grown is significant. That corresponds with the growth in the popularity of film and TV media, the internet and wider coverage generally.

The real reason though that the men's sport still attracts greater viewing figures is not because of personal choice, but due to the lack of TV coverage in women's sport. Women's sport remains less visible than men's sport on TV. If you want to watch live sport on TV, you are most likely to see men's sport being covered. Take cycling as an example. The men's stages of the Tour de France are covered from start to finish. The women's stages – which are usually shorter in distance anyway – may provide coverage only for the last half. It is also universally accepted that viewers prefer to watch men, or maybe more men watch sport on TV!

But even as recently as 2018, male respondents perceived women to be inferior at sport, both in terms of skill and strength. Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal have even claimed that men should earn more as they attract larger audiences and other arguments are that they play longer matches – however official viewing figures show that fans' interest is not down to gender; refreshingly, it is determined by individual performance and personality.⁷

This was borne out between the years of 2010-2014 when the US Open women's final drew larger audiences than that of the men. The popularity of the women's event was, of course, boosted considerably by the fact that Serena Williams was ever present in those finals. But it led to an interest in women's tennis which has not abated in the years since. What could further enhance this view and opinion

5 "The UK's Attitudes Towards Women In Sport", in: *Insure4Sport Blog*, 5 April 2018, available at www.insure4sport.co.uk/blog/the-uks-attitudes-towards-women-in-sport, accessed 26 November 2023).

6 "When did women first compete in the Olympic Games?", in: *IOC – Frequently asked questions*, available at <https://olympics.com/ioc/faq/history-and-origin-of-the-games/when-did-women-first-compete-in-the-olympic-games> (accessed 26 November 2023).

7 Daniel Levitt, "Wimbledon 2018 – State of pay: tennis has huge gender gap in earning power", in: *The Guardian*, 14 July 2018, available at www.theguardian.com/sport/ng-interactive/2018/jul/14/tennis-pay-gap-shouldnt-be-gender-based (accessed 26 November 2023).

is simply greater coverage of women participating doubled with a concerted effort of raising awareness and investment at grassroots level so that the next Leah Williamson, Emma Raducanu or Denise Lewis is found.⁸ It all comes back to the triad of the audience, sponsors and athletes.

Coverage of women's sports events in the EU Media attention is vital for athletes and clubs. In today's world of access to news reporting as it happens and the ever-increasing thirst for knowledge and information, social media savvy athletes can get ahead in this game. Athletes can take control of their own narrative, tell their stories directly and build their own audience. With the aforementioned team of advisors on hand, self-promotion and hype is possible. This provides a platform for interest, which can lead to investment and, in turn, can intensify the position of the athletes and clubs, paving the way to development.

An idea mooted previously, and, in fact, already a criterion for hosting some sports events, is setting a mandatory minimum quota for coverage of an event by broadcasters in the EU. If they cannot grant TV rights and provide coverage of the event for at least that minimum time, they cannot host the event. A cost of hosting the event is the TV rights enabling the showcasing and publication of women's events. This was deemed to be unworkable and counterproductive. Returning to cycling, in 2022 the UCI, the world governing body of cycling, threatened to demote the race from the highest level – the Women's World Tour to a UCI ProSeries Tour due to the organisers failure to provide live TV coverage. In the end, the organisers persuaded the UCI that they would have the coverage. There was never any question of the Men's Tour of Britain receiving less (or no) coverage. Sports events need to be exciting and generate drama to be successful. It is fair to say that every EU country has household names of female athletes that, on their given day, will generate interest and big audiences. But here is the catch: if governing bodies and sporting organisations do not sustain a long-term strategy, then interest will wane, and the wheel will stop moving forward.

By focussing attention on “*equality means visibility*” the former UK Sports Minister, Mims Davies, rightly raised the awareness to major broadcasters to increase their coverage of women's sports events and that they should not be treated as a “novelty”.⁹ There were

similar noises coming out of France¹⁰ and Spain¹¹.

USA leads the way!

The USA has seen a much greater rise in the popularity of female sports, with some traditionally male-orientated sports becoming less popular than the women's equivalent – football (soccer), for example. Why? In 1972, Richard Nixon passed Title IX of the Education Amendments¹² – the gist being that:

“no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

So, what does the sporting landscape in the USA look like for women now, fifty years on? In a nutshell, it has a proven track record (excuse the pun!) of supporting and producing elite women in sport that are winners and household names. To back this up, in 1991 the United States Women's National Soccer Team (“USWNT”) won the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup Final – in fact they have gone on to win it a further three times, in 1999, 2015 and 2019. That is the same number as Germany and Italy in the Mens World Cup! Furthermore, the USWNT have won the CONCACAF Women's Championship and Gold Cup nine times since its inception in 1991.

The success does not just stop with football, or soccer as it is called over the pond. When you think of US sports, basketball is likely to be high up the list. In fact, there was not even a Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in 1970. The first one was only set up in 1997.

In the last four summer Olympics, US women have taken home more medals than the American men. In the 2020 Tokyo Games, US women won 66 of the United States' 113 medals – that is 58%.

To further endorse the impact of Title IX, the fastest growing sport in the USA currently is “flag football”. So much so that it has been added to the Olympics for the 2028 Games, which will take place in Los Angeles. The drive to ensure the masses came to watch women in the US undoubtedly started with the likes of Billie Jean King and Wilma Rudolph, but has now grown to include Serena Williams, Megan Rapinoe and Katie

¹⁰ Isabelle Mourgere, “Sport “féminin” et médias: une visibilité gagnée aux points... d'audimat?”, in: *TV5Monde*, 9 February 2018, available at <https://information.tv5monde.com/terriennes/sport-feminin-et-medias-une-visibilite-gagnee-aux-points-dauidimat-28394> (accessed 26 November 2023).

¹¹ “El deporte femenino no alcanza el 10% de las noticias deportivas en televisión, que en un 75% son de fútbol masculino”, in: *La Información*, 13 December 2016, available at www.lainformacion.com/deporte/femenino-noticias-deportivas-television-masculino_o_980602607.html (accessed 26 November 2023).

¹² U.S. Department of Education, “Sex Discrimination: Overview of the Law”, available at www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/ocr/sexoverview.html (accessed 26 November 2023).

⁸ “This Girl Can” campaign, available at www.thisgirlcan.co.uk (accessed 26 November 2023).

⁹ Jeremy Wilson, “Sports minister calls for more women's sport on TV”, in: *The Telegraph*, 11 February 2019, available at www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2019/02/11/sports-minister-calls-womens-sport-tv (accessed 26 November 2023).

Ledecky. The latter being a 7-time gold medallist at the Olympics at swimming; hardly a mainstream sport.

The impact on women's sport in the USA is working, infectious and being done for the right reasons – not just for the mainstream sports. The likes of Simone Biles, the most decorated gymnast in history, Lindsay Vonn, four-times winner of the World Cup championships as an alpine ski racer, and Jacqueline Joyner-Kersey, a track and field athlete in the heptathlon and long jump who won three gold, one silver and two bronze Olympic medals in these events at four different Olympics, are testament to that. We are waiting for the rest of the world to catch up in terms of investment, awareness, and the most basic ingredient to be a winner, namely, hunger for success. The landscape is definitely changing, and for the better, but in some countries their respective governing bodies are slower. This manifests itself in fewer girls at a young age having less or no access to facilities and opportunities.

The Lionesses, women's football and why it is growing popular every day

Football is probably the most common and sought after currency in the sporting world, as everyone has probably played it at some stage or knows someone that has. A lot of people in the sporting world want to be involved in it and in many countries, it is their number one sport. It is, therefore, not surprising it is also the most popular sport played amongst girls and women. FIFA reports that over 30 million girls and women play football. The USA, Germany, Canada and Sweden have the largest numbers of registered female players again according to FIFA.

UEFA, in 2010, launched its women's football development programme¹³ with the aim of driving future growth and sustainability in the women's game. They funded it, and offered knowledge-sharing schemes, practical courses and advisory programmes in key areas, including on- and off-field development, coaching and refereeing.

This had a big impact and, after thirteen years, the development of the game in Europe has steadily grown. Attendances are up, TV coverage has become more mainstream on prime and free-to-air channels. As an example, the Lionesses (the English national team) saw a meteoric rise in their popularity with their recent victory in 2022 when they were crowned European champions. But this is where the impact of the growth of the women's game versus the commerciality was clearly visible. People wanted to show their support by wearing replica kits. Something that fans in the men's sport take for granted – they can buy a replica of their favourite player. Yet if your child wanted to be a goalkeeper, you could not buy a goalkeeper's jersey with the England goalie's name, Mary

Earps, before or during the FIFA Women's World Cup.¹⁴ Such was the public outcry that it became front page news. It was because an agreement could not be reached before the same World Cup kicked off regarding their bonus deal.¹⁵

If we take the last two incidents as an example as to why the English FA and Nike scored own goals, ask yourself: "Would this happen in the men's game?" The simple answer is NO. More importantly, it simply would not have been allowed to happen – can you imagine not being able to purchase a Jordan Pickford shirt? Or the men's team going to a tournament without any agreement regarding loyalty bonuses?

In 2022, in the world's biggest competition in women's football, this is exactly what happened. When Mary Earps even offered to pay for the shirts herself, the response from Nike was:

"Nike is committed to women's football and we're excited by the passion around this year's tournament and the incredible win by the Lionesses to make it into the final. *We are proudly offering the best of Nike innovation and services to our federation partners and hundreds of athletes.* We hear and understand the desire for a retail version of a goalkeeper jersey and we are working towards solutions for future tournaments, in partnership with FIFA and the federations."

Such a statement does not reflect the commercial reality of the success of the team and demonstrates how little value Nike considered the team's success was worth. In relation to the bonus and commercial structures, the Lionesses had expressed, before the FIFA Women's World Cup kicked off, that they were "disappointed" at the talks not being resolved. The most damning aspect of this was that the players say they have a "strong sense of responsibility".

Is it too strong to think and say that the English FA should have had that high on their list of priorities? To capitalise on the popularity, the successful growth of the women's game and continued sustainability, you cannot argue with the statement that "equality means visibility". And again, this simply does not happen in the men's game. It should not be happening in the women's game at all, let alone twelve months ago!

¹⁴ Ed Dixon, "Lionesses "disappointed" after failing to reach bonus deal before Women's World Cup", in: *SportsPro*, available at www.sportspromedia.com/womens-sport/england-lionesses-womens-world-cup-bonuses-talksport-radio-rights-fifa-tickets-attendance/?zeph_sso_ott=ohJGck (accessed 26 November 2023).

¹⁵ Ewan Roberts, "Nike issue fresh statement on Mary Earps shirt controversy after World Cup heroics", in: *Metro*, 21 August 2023, available at <https://metro.co.uk/2023/08/20/nike-issue-new-statement-on-mary-earps-goalkeeper-kit-controversy-19366073> (accessed 26 November 2023).

¹³ "UEFA Women's Football Development & Free-Kicks", available at www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/Women/General/02/26/30/64/2263064_DOWNLOAD.pdf (accessed 26 November 2023).

Conclusion

The popularity and growth in women's sport is on the rise and rise. At last, it looks like it is here to stay and be an increasing part of the mainstream sporting fixtures in our calendars. However, change is still needed. Investment is required at all levels, the model of the men's sporting world needs to be embraced, adopted and changed where, as need be, to reflect the standing that women in sport have and the place they rightly take in society, in our classrooms, on our TV sets, in our social media platforms, and so on.

Women's sport is not a lesser version of men's sport. It has its own fans, personalities, heroes and villains and deserves to be celebrated. It is exciting, and it can be transformative.

To prove the point that support is needed to engage women and girls in participating in sport themselves, irrespective of the recent success in many women's sports in the UK in recent years, is the damning statistic revealed in a survey reported in *The Guardian* newspaper.¹⁶ This states that 1 million girls lose interest in sport as teenagers.

Whilst there is real solid and tangible progress, there is a message which is still not being heard: sport is positive for the individual, the team, society, and the community but the pressure to maintain positive and visible focus on women's sport must continue until it is the norm and not the exception, so that there are many more Leah Williamsons, Emma Raducanus, Laura Kennys and Nicola Adams's coming through the ranks, just like there is a who's who on the men's conveyor belt of sporting success.

If the USA could set up legislation over fifty years ago, which promotes equality and supports and harnesses the visibility and strength of women in sport, then why cannot the rest of the world do the same. As the Napoleonic aristocratic Prussian diplomat Klemens Wenzel Fürst von Metternich wrote: "When Paris sneezes, Europe catches a cold"; the modern-day sporting twist should be: "When America sneezes, the world catches a cold". Maybe in the sporting context we should follow the example set over fifty years ago and lead the way, just like the women are doing so admirably!

¹⁶ "More than 1 million girls in the UK lose interest in sport as teenagers", in: *The Guardian*, 7 March 2022, available at www.theguardian.com/education/2022/mar/07/uk-girls-lose-interest-in-sport-as-teenagers-women-in-sport-survey (accessed 26 November 2023).