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Opinion

Developing sports leagues suffer from media's choices

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How do individuals become fans of a sport or a specific team? Researchers Daniel Funk and Jeff James developed the Psychological Continuum Model to explain this process, which begins with awareness and graduates to attraction, attachment and allegiance.

But how can consumers become aware of marginalized sports if these sports are nearly invisible in U.S. mainstream media? Why is a professional sport league such as the WNBA given minimal mainstream coverage while other "sports," such as poker, paintball, spelling bees and hot dog eating contests, are appearing with growing frequency on ESPN?

Television is the most pervasive media source in the United States, as approximately 90 percent of all households have at least one television. The content on television suggests to the public "what they need to know" in two ways: What is viewed on television is deemed important and having value, and what is not viewed on television is deemed not newsworthy and therefore unimportant, lacking value.



Game 5 of the WNBA Finals drew 19,671 fans to Detroit's Joe Louis Arena.

For example, nationwide an average of 6 percent to 8 percent of print and televised media content pertains to women's sports. More specifically the WNBA's 2006 television contract guaranteed a minimum of 32 games spread among ESPN, ESPN2 and ABC for the entire season whereas, during the first four months of the 2006-07 NBA season 78 games are scheduled on ESPN, TNT and ABC. Therefore, women's sports are often perceived as less important than men's sports or others given routine coverage on ESPN.

Women's sport leagues are disregarded by media programmers due to "lack of interest," resulting in lack of network or ESPN coverage. How, then, do these same programmers explain 17,137 fans crowded into Arco Arena to watch a preseason Sacramento Monarchs game or an overall league attendance average of 7,480 for the 2006 season?

Another standard rebuttal media organizations provide regarding the under-representation of women's sports is a policy claim of not participating in "promotional journalism." What constitutes promotional coverage? If the power of television coverage and the correlation with interest in the sport is in question, look no further than the X Games. ESPN single-handedly ushered activities once reserved for rebellious teenagers, such as skateboarding, snowboarding and BMX racing, into mainstream sports culture. With programming and promotion, the X Games were quickly embraced as "real" sports containing cultural value.

What standard is used to determine television-worthy level of interest? Statistics are often used to determine interest, yet interpretations of statistics can vary drastically. For instance, if a player shoots 40 percent from the 3- point line, journalists report 40 percent of her shots were made, rather than 60 percent of her shots were missed. However, the media consistently employs the latter approach when reporting on marginalized professional leagues, such as primarily focusing on empty WNBA arena seats despite the league's top-drawing games attracting more than 11,000 fans.

These "half-empty" reports, which are equated with lack of interest or floundering league viability, frame women's professional basketball as uninteresting, thereby reinforcing second-class citizenship within the

hierarchy of sports. This hierarchy perpetuated by mainstream media is used to justify excluding the leagues from mainstream television coverage. If league attendance is the benchmark of interest, then making parallel, rather than "half-empty" comparisons in the media is warranted.

Women's professional basketball is still in its nascent stage. However, the WNBA is continuously compared with its mature brand counterpart, the NBA, instead of comparing the leagues during similar developmental times. The NBA needed more than 30 years and substantially more media coverage than the WNBA is currently receiving to achieve the modern-day NBA attendance average. Comparing the WNBA and the NBA league attendance averages 10 years after inception, the WNBA (7,711) currently has higher average attendance than the NBA (3,983) did. More important, perhaps, is the fact the WNBA is attracting more fans despite significantly more contemporary entertainment options. Unparallel comparisons reinforce consumer doubts and fuel the "interest" debate.

The public's perception of interest for marginalized professional sport leagues are significantly influenced by their respective media coverage. Ultimately, the media can shape public interest. Currently the media is increasing interest in gambling, adults shooting each other with paintballs, and less than healthy eating patterns. Media programmers can generate interest in existing marginalized professional sport leagues by leaving hot dog eating to fans in the stands, and providing accurate and representative coverage of sports.

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