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*Communication & Sport* 2013 1: 113 originally published online 30 December 2012

DOI: 10.1177/2167479512467977

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# Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Men and Masculinities

Communication & Sport  
1(1/2) 113-124  
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DOI: 10.1177/2167479512467977  
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Michael Messner<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In this essay, Michael Messner focuses on a key part of a broader research agenda on gender and sport and reflects on the context and meanings of media characterizations of men and masculinities in the sport setting. The first part of the essay focuses on how one's core identity as a male who grew up experiencing understandings of sport through the lens of media continues to be influenced by sensibilities that can conflict with revised beliefs about gender. The second part of the essay reflects on the author's scholarly journey in focusing on gender and televised sport and the importance of extending one's work beyond academia and into the public sphere. The focus section of the essay on "Men and Masculinities" examines four clusters of research on: (1) scandals and fallen heroes, (2) consumption of sports media as a male preserve, (3) sports, masculinities, politics, and war, and (4) female athletes as visible cultural icons. The essay closes with observations for future directions in research on gender, sport, and media.

## Keywords

masculinities, gender, sport, media, communication

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## Why Communication and Sport Matters

This morning, as with most mornings, I trudged toward wakefulness with a cup of strong coffee, and with the *Los Angeles Times* spread on the table before me. Vegetables first: I scan the front section for the day's news. Then dessert, the sports section: skimming by three full pages of stories on Dodgers and Angels Baseball, University of California, Los Angeles, University of Southern California and pro football, I land in the place that, since my boyhood years, has been my sweet spot: the baseball box scores. A Giants win, coupled with another Dodgers loss has stretched my team's September lead to six games. I had already known this good news last night; it even crossed my mind while I was still barely conscious in bed this morning, but still, I wanted to read it in the paper.

Yeah, there it is: a six-game lead over the Dodgers. I don't know, there may be a bit of a smirk on my face as my eyes scan to the facing page 5, and then I see it. In the lower right corner of the page, below a boxing story with a photo of a victorious Sergio Martinez, actually wearing a king's crown, my eyes settle on a one-eighth-page ad, taken up mostly with a photo of a model—beautiful young woman showing plenty of skin, sitting on the edge of the bed and looking simultaneously sexy and sadly disappointed. Behind her, in soft focus, her male partner is crashed out; I can almost hear his snoring. The caption, PREMATURE ISSUE? frames the photo, followed by the “guarantee” that “National Male Medical Clinics” can “solve ANY PE problem TODAY”—and starting with a mere \$95 one-time office visit.

This juxtaposition begins to illustrate one reason it is important to think critically about men, masculinities, and sports media. On one hand, the sports page—or *Sports Illustrated*, or ESPN's *SportsCenter*, or sports talk radio—are seemingly harmless go-to places where every day, millions of boys and men enter an all-male world to “BIRG” (Bask In Reflected Glory) of the heroic exploits of male athletes (Beneke, 1997). Indeed, with the exception of the ad about premature ejaculation, the eight pages of this morning's sports page offer no clue that women even exist, except for a tiny page 2 box that directs the reader to go to *latimes.com*, if he or she would like to read a story about the U.S. Women's soccer team. Not much room in the actual paper for that sort of thing, I guess: not when there is so much football happening. But the PE ad brings up another side of what is going on here, and a hint about why it matters to think a bit more deeply about this topic. Such ads do not appear every day in the sports pages. They are rare on weekends, when the excitement of the day's games is still mostly ahead of us. But, I have noticed over the years, such ads pop up with great regularity in the Monday paper—ads for treating erectile dysfunction (this past Monday, a full-page ad for Cialis), for reversing hair loss, and losing that extra twenty pounds of flab. Advertisers seem to know that for men, Monday mornings can be a time of disappointment—not so much with our favorite team's performance, but with our own. Friday night's fantasy of excitement, triumph, roaring sex has fizzled and withered into Monday morning's receding hairline. We are not the muscular boxer wearing the crown, we know; we are the guy

in the ED ad, asleep and unable to satisfy the beautiful woman who, it appears, may be realizing that she had best move on to some other guy who is not such a loser.

This juxtaposition interests me, and I have always found it important: There is so clearly a disjunction between men's connection with mediated male heroes and our own less than heroic experiences with masculinity. We read the box scores, watch televised games and highlight shows, and check the Internet for scores and updates on our favorite teams. We experience this connection to sports as a go-to place of pleasure, a place that feels separate, as an escape from the rest of life. But as a sociologist, I know that it is not separate at all. Sport has such power as a consumable item of culture that many of us experience it as a separate space; yet, our sports fantasies are tied to our own fears, inadequacies, even failures as men, as the Monday morning paper illustrates. More, the "sports-media complex"—that multibillion dollar partnership of commercial spectator sports with the mass media—linked with billions of dollars in advertising and consumer products—makes these connections for us every day, and mostly without seeming to (Jhally, 1984). The sports-media-commercial complex consistently sells boys and men a glorified package of what masculinity is and should be, regularly nudges us with reminders that we do not measure up to this standard, and then offers compensatory products—beer, underwear, cars, shaving products and, yes, erectile dysfunction medications—that promise transcendence from the shameful knowledge that, even if our team is in first place, we individual men are in fact losers (Messner & Montez de Oca, 2005; Wenner, 1991).

## **My Journey With Communication and Sport**

Of course, there is far more to this topic than the commercial exploitation of tensions between masculine sports heroism and masculine failure. My interest in sports and masculinity as an academic topic started when, in graduate school in the early 1980s, I put my own lifelong attachment to sports into play with emergent feminist theories of masculinities. My first empirical project was an examination of men's lives as athletes (Messner, 1992). But my interests, inspired by feminism, went beyond concerns with the male life course—I wanted to explore sport as place where gender relations were being actively constructed. The 1980s were an opportune time to do this, as sport was transforming from an almost entirely homosocial institution to one with dramatically increasing participation by girls and women. How, I wondered, can we understand sport historically, not as some fixed patriarchal institution, but as a dynamic gender construction site? I postulated that while mid-century sport had been a nearly unambiguous site for the construction of binary conceptions of gender, and for the ideological legitimization of hegemonic masculinity, late twentieth-century sport had become a "contested terrain" of gender relations and meanings (Messner, 1988). The mass media was a key site for studying how these contested gender meanings would play out.

At the end of the 1980s, I met media studies scholar Margaret Carlisle Duncan at a mini-conference that was held by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles

(later renamed the LA84 Foundation). When the Foundation's jarringly critical clips of racist and sexist sports reporting were largely denied as anecdotal or "cherry picked examples" by the media people in the audience, Margaret and I offered to do some systematic research on televised sports for the Foundation. This began a productive collaboration on what became a longitudinal study. Duncan and I issued research reports on televised sports news every 5 years hence (adding ESPN's *SportsCenter* in for the 2000 report); Cheryl Cooky joined me in conducting the most recent update of the study in 2010 (Messner & Cooky, 2010).

In our first Gender in Televised Sports report, issued in 1990, Duncan and I showed that televised sports news was mostly ignoring women's sports, which got only 5% of all sports news airtime. Worse, when women (as athletes or not) did show up in the news, they were frequently trivialized, sexualized, and deployed as locker-room jokes. This combination of silence and trivialization spoke volumes, not only about deeply sexist attitudes toward women but also about the sports media's continued focus on sport as a terrain by and for the elevation of men as a superior sex class. This idea—that gender is always constructed *relationally*—became a foundational concern for thinking about men and masculinities. We could not understand the meanings of the (mostly) glorified cacophony of talk and images about men and sports without juxtaposing that noise with the silence and the "denial of power" within which the mass media couched women's sports (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003).

And what did that cacophony of talk and images of men and sport say to us? In a study of televised sports that boys frequently watch, my colleagues Darnell Hunt and Michele Dunbar and I revealed what we called "the televised sports manhood formula," an overarching narrative about men and gender that cuts across live broadcasts and accompanying commercials (Messner, Dunbar & Hunt, 2000). The elements of the formula, we argued, constitute a pedagogy of manhood for young male viewers:

What is a Real Man? A Real Man is strong, tough, aggressive, and above all, a winner in what is still a Man's World. To be a winner he has to do what needs to be done. He must be willing to compromise his own long-term health by showing guts in the face of danger, by fighting other men when necessary, and by "playing hurt" when he's injured. He must avoid being soft; he must be the aggressor, both on the "battle fields" of sports and in his consumption choices. Whether he is playing sports or making choices about which snack food or auto products to purchase, his aggressiveness will net him the ultimate prize: the adoring attention of conventionally beautiful women. He will know if and when he has arrived as a Real Man when the Voices of Authority—White Males—say he is a Real Man. But even when he has finally managed to win the big one, has the good car, the right beer, and is surrounded by beautiful women, he will be reminded by these very same Voices of Authority just how fragile this Real Manhood really is: After all, he has to come out and prove himself all over again tomorrow. You're only as good as your last game (or your last purchase).

These research reports on gender in televised sports have been meaningful for me in a number of ways. First, the public nature of the reports has helped to stretch my work beyond academia; the reports have been used by women's sports advocacy organizations and in journalism schools. Second, the study's longitudinal nature has helped my thinking about looking at sport as a gender regime with a shifting and contested "state of play" in which certain sorts of men—particularly football, basketball, and baseball (and sometimes ice hockey) players—are given the vast majority of attention. Meanwhile, other men's sports are ignored and even sometimes trivialized in ways similar to how women's sports are treated. Put in the language of social theory, sports media does not simply construct hegemonic masculinity in relation to femininities but also in relation to marginalized or subordinated masculinities (Connell, 1989).

## **Focus: On Men and Masculinities**

Over the past 20 years, a substantial body of literature has emerged that focuses on various aspects of men, gender, media, and sports. Here, I discuss four general areas of this scholarly work: case studies of male sports figures as "fallen heroes"; studies of the consumption of mediated sports as a male preserve; scholarship that explores the connections between mediated sport and larger historical, structural, and political processes; and discussions of how shifts in the coverage of women's sports affect the meanings of men's sports. In my brief overview of each theme, I will emphasize especially how shifting and contested images of women and men, mediated through sports media, have played mostly a conservative, reproductive role in gender relations.

### *Scandals and Fallen Heroes*

Recent years have seen a decline of the past tendency in sports journalism to give famous men (be they politicians or athletes) a pass on off-field transgressions. The sports pages are peppered with stories of the latest athlete's DUI, drug test failure, arrest for possession of illegal firearms, assault, rape, or domestic partner violence. These stories hold the potential to disrupt the ideological association of male athletes as glorified icons of hegemonic masculinity. A number of years ago, media scholar William Solomon and I followed a story about boxer Sugar Ray Leonard's drug use and battery of his wife, looking at the ways that the story deployed "news frames" to render invisible the family violence part of the story, and introduced a language of redemption for Leonard's "mistakes" with drugs and alcohol (Messner & Solomon, 1993). This frame, we argued, helped to defuse the potential of such stories to delegitimize the sport of boxing in particular, and more generally to raise questions about the ways that sexism and violence are joined in men's sports.

Since that time, other scholars have deployed similar methods to analyze case studies of media coverage of scandals and fallen heroes, and these scholars have increasingly deployed sophisticated intersectional analyses—looking at the interplay

of race, class, sexualities, and gender in the coverage of men's sports. Mary McDonald (1999) explored the gender and race dynamics in media coverage of well-known male figures in sport who were accused of domestic violence. Studies of media treatment of big-name male athletes who have contracted HIV have been especially useful in illuminating the intersections of gender with race and sexual orientation. For instance, McKay (1993) reflected critically on the ways that the media responded to basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson's revelation that he was HIV-positive by projecting Johnson's sexual promiscuity on to "wanton women." Dworkin and Wachs's (1998, 2000) comparison of mass media treatment of three stories of HIV-positive male athletes showed the ways that social class, race, and sexual orientation came in to play in the media's very different framings of these three stories. More recently, an intersectional analysis was deployed in examining the media's coverage of shock radio host Don Imus's scandalous statements about the Rutgers University women's basketball team (Cooky, Wachs, Messner, & Dworkin, 2010; Wachs, Cooky, Messner, & Dworkin, 2012). Together, these studies show how the sports media continues to play a largely reproductive—rather than critical or disruptive—role in the politics of sport and problems grounded in social inequalities.

### *Consumption of Sports Media as a Male Preserve*

Another strand of research focuses more on men as consumers of sports media. As noted above, sports are often experienced by men as a separate gendered place, as what Eric Dunning (1986) called "a male preserve" in an otherwise changing world. Researchers have explored how this male preserve is in fact connected to men's actual lives. In a classic study of in the *Sports Illustrated* "swimsuit issue," Laurel Davis pointed to how the popular annual magazine reflected and reproduced sport as a site of male, White, heterosexual, and even colonial privilege (Davis, 1997). Extending the analysis of the swimsuit issue, and adding the televised coverage of the Superbowl, Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) showed how beer and liquor ads position male consumers of "mega-sports media events" as losers, who might hope to consume their way out of their insecurities.

David Nylund's (2007) fascinating analysis of men's relationships with sports talk radio shows how important the articulation of heterosexuality is in this cultural recuperation of a threatened masculinity. And in an innovative study, Sabo, Gray, and Moore (2000) interviewed women who had been physically abused by their male partners during or shortly after the men watched televised sports. This kind of study begins to give researchers and activists a handle on what the links might be between a man's act of violence against a woman partner, with his acts of viewing violent sports, drinking alcohol, and gambling on sports. Similarly, Wenner's (1998) and Curry's (2000) studies of sports bars begin to show the construction of (sometimes violent) masculinities within the context of an institution that thrives on men's collective consumption of televised sports and alcohol.

## *Sport, Masculinities, Politics, and War*

While many studies of sports media and masculinities focus on the local or the case-study level, some scholars have also begun to examine this field in terms of large structural and transnational processes. This makes good sense, given the increasingly global nature of sports, and sports media (Miller, McKay, Lawrence, & Rowe, 2001). Montez de Oca's (2005, in press) groundbreaking work on the historical rise of American football illustrates the central role of the mass sports media, especially television, in the post-World War II construction of the White male citizen. In a similar vein, scholars have pointed to the ways in which mass spectator sports, amplified by mass media, build narrow notions of patriotism that link masculinity, nationalism, and the glorification of warfare (Bairner, 2000; Jansen & Sabo, 1994; Malszecki & Tomislava, 2001; Trujillo, 1995).

## *Female Athletes as Visible Cultural Icons*

Although my research with Duncan and Cooky reveals that televised news and highlight shows continue to treat women's sports as almost nonexistent, there has been a notable expansion of coverage of women's sports in other media outlets, and this has implications for how we view men and sport. Heywood and Dworkin (2003) have argued that women athletes have increasingly emerged, especially with younger girls, as cultural icons that signify a growing empowerment of women. This has occurred due to increased coverage of celebrity women athletes in advertising and in "new media" and also to some increases (albeit uneven and spotty) in live coverage of women's sporting events on television. For instance, although ESPN does not cover much women's sports on its popular highlights show *SportsCenter*, over the past decade, the cable sports outlet has dramatically increased the quantity and quality of play-by-play coverage of certain women's sports like college basketball and softball. On one hand, these developments challenge "hard essentialism"—the hegemonic post-War ideology that naturalized men's and women's binary and hierarchical oppositions. When girls and women play sports—and especially if we pay attention to their abilities and accomplishments—then "what sports illustrates," according to sociologist Judith Lorber, is not a binary opposition between male and female bodies, but instead, what Mary Jo Kane calls a "continuum of difference" between and among bodies of all sexes and genders (Kane, 1995; Lorber, 1996).

But the increased coverage of women's sports does not quite mean that it is "time for a victory lap" (Bernstein, 2002). The growth of coverage of women's sports within new media, in particular, might be seen as a containment or ghettoization of women's sports. For instance, ESPN has recently introduced ESPNW, a fledgling online site for the coverage of women's sports. While this may be a welcome development for fans who are hungry for more coverage of women's sports, it may also help to take mainstream media carriers off the hook in making any pretense of increased (much less fair or equal) coverage of women's sports. Put simply, creating



the women's sports information ghetto ESPNW allows the much better funded and far more visible father station to remain, implicitly, ESPNM.

Further, though our most recent studies of gender in televised sports news and highlight shows revealed a decline in disrespectful trivialization and sexualization of women athletes, other research points to a continuation of these sorts of containments of women's power (Daniels & LaVoi, 2012). In addition to the familiar sexualization theme, a new frame seems to be arising in coverage of women's sports, and this seemed especially evident in the televised coverage of the 2012 Olympics: focusing on women athletes as family members and mothers who have made difficult individual choices to pursue their Olympics dreams. Conversely, men athletes' families are less often discussed; men are more likely to be looked at as "natural athletes." Elsewhere, I have referred to this emergent frame of women (flexible work-family choosers) and men (linear creatures, naturally disposed to sports and public life) as being at the heart of an emergent ideology of "soft essentialism" (Messner, 2011). The rise in popularity of men's combat sports (the continued popularity of football, and the explosion of Ultimate Fighting) serves to bolster this emergent ideology: in the face of women's emergence as athletes, glorified images of massively built and violent male bodies may help erase or at least mitigate the extent to which women's increasing athleticism reveals a continuum of difference.

Most of the research I have discussed above—whether it looks at male sports heroes' scandals, sport as a site of gendered consumption, sports media's role in nationalism or global processes, or the reporting of women's sports—illustrates the largely reproductive nature of mass mediated sport, both in terms of content and consumption. However, neither sport nor sport media are seamless fields. Rather, there are increasingly evident fissures, contradictions, and disjunctures in the edifice of cultural formations of sport, men, and masculinities. In the final section, I will suggest ways that future research might explore these fissures as sites of possible social change.

## Looking Ahead for Communication and Sport Research

Scholars of gender and sports media have engaged in a good deal of chicken-or-egg discussions in recent years: Will media interest in women's sports expand when actual audiences expand, or do audiences expand in the wake of increases in coverage? While the answer is, of course, "both-and," the question itself tends to oversimplify the complex dynamics at work. Clearly, the expanding athleticism and love of sports among girls and younger generations of women have begun to explode the mid-20th-century myths of categorical male bodily superiority. But the mass media's continued focus primarily on central men's sports mitigates the potentially progressive impact of female athleticism in the larger gender order. While there are market concerns (often very narrowly defined) in deciding which sports to cover and how to cover them, it is also likely that gender divisions of labor on the production end also figure in to these decisions. While a few women have broken into sports reporting and commenting, this workplace is still dominated by men (Etling & Young, 2007; Sheffer &

Shultz, 2007). For instance, in our 2010 televised sports report, we found that men commentators took up 99.5% of the sports news and 89% of SportsCenter's airtime (Messner & Cooky, 2010). Scholars would do well to investigate sports journalism and commentary—print and electronic—as gendered work sites, and to explore how these gendered worksites help shape assumptions and practices as to what to report and how to report it (Hardin & Whiteside, 2008; Kane & Disch, 1993).

Future studies should also focus on the consumption end of sports media. As an example of such research, Whiteside and Hardin (2011) show that women's lower levels of sports viewing are linked not to a lack of interest on their parts, but to the ways in which sports viewing for women too often does not mesh with family work. In short, in examining gender at the consumption end of sports media, it is necessary to explore not simply "tastes" but also how the consumption of sports media fits (or does not) with gendered divisions of labor at the juncture of leisure, work, and family life (Messner, 2009). Gender relations are strained and shifting at the nexus of these gender regimes. Under what conditions will this result in a degendering and equalization of sports—both as a product and as a field of consumption and leisure? And under what conditions do men respond to these strains by retreating to contemporary "man caves" to consume men's sports (and related products) pitched to them by male commentators? In other words, we need to more fully examine sports media not simply as "texts"—but also at points of production and points of consumption—in terms of larger gender divisions of labor and power.

Another potential site for change, and thus for critical research, concerns the emergence of "others" in sport who do not neatly fit within a gender binary. Scholars have focused for years on the ways that race/ethnicity complicates research on "men and sport" or "women and sport." But the analysis of race and sport in the United States too often has fallen into a Black–White binary. Does the recent explosion of interest in NBA player Jeremy Lin create an opportunity to deploy a multiracial analysis of men in sports media? Is such a prominent Asian American star framed as a "model minority" in ways that stabilize basketball as a "Black sport?" Similarly, recent stories of progay marriage statements by high-profile male athletes and professional teams create an opportunity to explore how, or under what conditions, hegemonic masculinity is still policed by homophobia, and under what conditions hegemonic masculinity might be under reconstruction, no longer anchored by overtly cruel homophobia, but perhaps instead grounded in a seemingly benign "family friendly" heteronormativity. Offering an even more fundamental challenge to sex/gender binaries in sports media are stories of transgender athletes, though such high-profile stories have thus far been more about inclusion or exclusion of transgender athletes within women's sports (Cooky, Dykus, & Dworkin, 2012; Dworkin, Swarr, & Cooky, in press).

And finally, the recent burst of concern about head injuries and brain damage suffered by athletes—especially football players—creates an important opportunity for scholars of sports media. The mounting medical evidence, the continuing parade of sad stories of middle-aged men with advancing dementia, and the collective legal suits now being waged by former players against football leagues are all huge stories

(Anderson & Kian, 2012). Do these stories simply operate in some parallel journalistic universe to the continued business-as-usual stories of football glory? Or, does this story of the extreme “costs of masculinity” paid by our Sunday heroes sometimes bleed into the play-by-play broadcasts and the Monday headlines? If so, how and when does this happen? And when it does, might audiences—guys like me who like to read the sports pages—start to make the connection between the very real vulnerabilities of these sports heroes with our own vulnerabilities that are being tweaked by advertisers in these same newspaper pages? Today, people often bemoan the good old days when we could look up to our athletes as invulnerable heroes, as symbols of masculine perfection. I say the more the media can focus on athletes as real people—and especially as real bodies, with all their human vulnerabilities—the better for the athletes, and the better for all of us.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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