Sport Media Portrayal of Professional Sport Wives: A Content Analysis

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Sports are commonly regarded in American society as a family experience, in both fandom & participatory fashions (Coakley, 2015). Because athletics are so engrained in the culture, professional athletes are highly regarded within the American society and are heavily publicized, especially in sport media. Along with their ‘work’ being broadcasted, their private lives are also shared and exposed through professional media and social media outlets (Sanderson, 2009). Some sports, such as baseball, even have a reputation of idealizing home and family life (Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001), sometimes, arguably, blurring the line of sport work and family (i.e. the controversial story of MLB player Adam LaRoche ending his baseball career when his club president asked him to restrict the time his son spent with the team). Additionally, professional athletes are choosing to share more of their personal lives on social media, magazine spreads, and some, even on reality television shows (Harris, 2013). With the rise of internet usage in accessing sport media, social media sites, magazine spreads, and viewer-provided content websites, professional athletes are experiencing shrinking privacy boundaries between their professional and personal lives (Sanderson, 2009). With these shrinking privacy boundaries comes another inevitable intersection of sport and family, not just for fans but also for the athlete and his own family that could potentially have an effect on the athlete’s family, specifically his wife/fiancé.

As a crucial partner of a two-person career, wives and fiancés of professional athletes heavily invest in the sport career at high cost of self-sacrifice (Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Roderick, 2012; Thompson, 1990) and it has been said that their “relationship ‘work’ is a labor of love” (Roderick, 2012, p. 319). Wives of athletes are often the unrecognized worker of the two-person career, taking sole responsibility for the domestic aspects of the family, including being the main child-rear, balancing game, practice, travel and family schedules, managing frequent relocation, and investing in a career that is not her own (Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001; Ortiz, 2001). Ortiz (2001) describes the sport wife experience as a career-dominated marriage that requires the sport wife to “support and defer to the high-profile, high-status, high-salaried, and high-stress occupations of their husbands” (p. 199). Despite the heavy personal, emotional, familial, and time investment provided by the sport wife, Gmelch & San Antonio (2001) explain that “the typical fan’s image of players’ wives- which comes primarily from televised glimpses of them in the stands- is that they are pretty, wear stylish clothes, and lead a life of privilege” (p. 336). While this assessment is made solely on the media portrayal of the sport wife during the athletic event, with the shrinking privacy boundaries, it is unclear if this claim is accurate of the portrayal of the sport wife in sport media through non-game related print media. As an integral part of the two-person career and with the shrinking privacy boundaries that athletes are experiencing, the sport media’s portrayal of sport wives and fiancés can become an integral aspect of the portrayal of sport families.

Although sport wives in the media haven’t been widely researched, sport media portrayal of women in sport, such as athletes and female sport reporters, has been vastly studied and scrutinized (Coakley, 2015; Cooky, Wachs, Messner, & Dworkin, 2010; Pedersen, Laucella, Kian, & Geurin, 2017). The research has shown that in sport, which is dominated with hegemonic masculinity-based ideals (Coakley, 2015; Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2017), women in sport careers have experienced disparities (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012; Whiteside & Hardin, 2012), along with being trivialized, sexualized, and silenced in sport media (Cooky et al., 2010; Pedersen et al., 2017). Studies have found that women athletes receive biased coverage and overall less coverage when compared to men’s sports (Pedersen et al., 2017). While most of these types of media framing studies focused on women that were the primary actor in the sport career (female athlete or female sport reporter), the proposed study will evaluate if women acting in the complementary role of the two-person career (athlete’s wife/fiancé) would experience the same or different framing within sport media (Entman, 1993).
The proposed pilot study will use a content analysis methodology to study the contexts in which sport media frames professional male athlete’s wives and female fiancés. Stempel (2003) describes content analysis as a “formal system for doing something we all do informally rather frequently—drawing conclusions from observations of content” (p. 209). Riffe, Lacy, & Fico (2005) define content analysis more definitively as the “systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication…and the analysis of relationships…to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption” (p. 25). This methodology requires the researcher to determine the contexts, meanings, and relationships of the texts, concepts, and visual representations within the content source (Cooky et al., 2010).

The proposed pilot study will evaluate the framing of wives and female fiancés of professional male athletes in articles, features, and visual images in ESPN (ESPN.com) and Sports Illustrated (si.com). Internet usage in America has seen dramatic increases over the past decade, with 88% of the population currently using the internet (“Internet usage”, 2015), with many users accessing online sports information (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Pedersen, 2014). ESPN and Sports Illustrated were specifically chosen to evaluate because these are two of the most popular sport websites (“Top 15 Most Popular Sport Websites”, 2016), and the only two out of the top five sport websites that also have a corresponding magazine that is considered the most popular sporting magazines (Pedersen et al., 2017), thus, ensuring that the outlet is successful in developing content beyond sport highlights and updated competition scores.

Using the search function on each respective website, the researchers will use the search terms “sport wife”, “professional sport wife”, “sport family”, and “professional sport family” to locate the top 40 articles of the search results for each site involving current or retired male professional athletes and their wives/female fiancés. This number was chosen to ensure the researchers evaluate the most relevant articles based on the desired search terms. Of the search results, articles or features written or produced by current or retired athletes or their wives will be excluded from the study to prevent any potential personally biased representation within the article. Additionally, only articles that mention the wife/fiancé in text or show visual representation through pictures of the wife/fiancé will be considered for the study. Within the retrieved articles, researchers will evaluate the words and images in the article or feature. To minimize the coder differences that may be caused by personal influences that affect perception and interpretation of content (Riffe et al., 2005), the researchers will be trained on proper coding protocol based on established coding procedures.

As a new area of scholarship, the results of this study will provide more information regarding the media portrayal of gender in sport, specifically as it relates to women acting within the complementary role of the two-person sport career. Such results could potentially lead to further understanding the cultural understanding and ideologies of the professional sport family and the work-family interplay in sport, as framing is communicative in nature (Entman, 1993). These communicative frames can also provide insight to the gender expectations and stereotypes that exist for women in sport, specifically those that are in the complementary role of the two-person professional sport career.