The Evolving Business of Women’s Sport

Nancy Lough, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Andrea Geurin, New York University
Donna De Haan, The Hague University of Applied Sciences
Erin McNary, University of Miami
Ceyda Mumcu, University of New Haven
Brianne Newland, New York University
Ted Peetz, Belmont University
Emma Sherry, Swinburne University of Technology
Erianne Weight, University of North Carolina
Brandon Brown, New York University

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The recent evolution of women’s sport has been dramatic, with indicators showing reason for continued growth. In this era when women’s sport is positioned to break new ground economically and socially, there is a need to focus on the value women bring to sport in economic terms. While the business of women’s sport is thriving now more than ever, theory, scholarship, and education focused on women’s sport is still lacking. This symposium brings thought leaders together to engage in discussion on some key questions emerging as we highlight the untapped business potential of women’s sport. Nielsen (2018) revealed that 84% of sports fans across eight key global markets are interested in women’s sport, 51% of whom are male, confirming that women’s sport is not limited to a women-only audience. Mumcu, Barnes, and Lough (2016) found that, on average, men comprise the majority of fans for the Women’s Tennis Association, Ladies’ Professional Golf Association, and National Pro Fastpitch. Economically, the business of women’s sport continues to demonstrate viability. This year, the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) reported record increases in viewership and revenue. In 2017, three teams experienced double-digit growth as well as a new high for average attendance (Lough, 2018). In college basketball, the Women’s Final Four reported a 20% viewership increase in 2017 (Hobson, 2017). Similarly, the Women’s College World Series (WCWS) had more viewers than the men’s College World Series in 2015 and 2016 (Nyatawa, 2017). In soccer, the 2015 Women’s World Cup championship game set viewership records, eclipsing ratings for other prominent mainstream sport properties. Recent scholarship about women’s sport demonstrates the emerging economic viability, while also pointing to significant challenges. Emerging questions include whether the antiquated approach to women’s sport coverage will be altered in the digital environment; what marketing distinctions relevant for women’s sport are understood, and what remain to be explored; and how “gatekeeping” prevents women from advancing to positions where decision making authority could significantly impact the relationship between consumers and the product, property, or event? These questions continue to evolve along with opportunities for innovative ways to market and sell women’s sport and for groups previously at the margins to be recognized and valued. Unique women’s sport scholarship has emerged in the last decade demonstrating a significant upswing in the quantity and quality of research in this area, identifying new avenues for understanding distinct aspects of women’s sport (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Kane, LaVoi, & Fink 2013; Mumcu, Lough, & Barnes, 2016). All seem to agree a different approach to the business of women’s sport is warranted, yet there is little agreement on what specific strategies are needed to ensure greater economic viability in the future. In this symposium, analysis of scholarly work and industry trends will frame our discussion to point toward strategic approaches that will continue the advancement of theory as well as the development of women’s sport as a commodity and women as leaders in the business of sport.