

Women's Sports in the Texas Print Media, 1942-1955

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Scholarly interest in media coverage of women's sports has increased recently. Researchers have found that today as in the past, female athletes receive media treatment significantly different from their male counterparts. Both the quality and

quantity of coverage vary. It is widely believed that since the nineteenth century, when American women's sports did receive coverage, reporters focused on beauty, domesticity, and charm, not athleticism, with photos stressing similar themes. However, almost without exception these generalizations are based on the press of major Eastern Cities.

Sport historians now concur that the sporting experiences of Eastern, educated, elite women did not accurately reflect the experiences of women from other backgrounds. The few studies of women's sports among diverse classes and geographical regions reveal significantly different patterns. Could the same be true of press coverage? Were sportswomen from all regions subjected to the same kind and amount of press bias?

This research examines coverage of women's sports in nine Texas newspapers during the months of March, June and September of 1942, 1944, 1946, 1948, 1950, 1952, and 1954, and included 1,995 articles and 222 photos. The communities had populations ranging from 6,400 to 594,000. Preliminary research indicates that the percentage of coverage accorded sporting women was not greater than previous studies, approximately 5 percent. Therefore, this research was concerned only with content, not amount of coverage.

Most of the articles featured Texans competing in Texas events. Most of the non-Texas articles were about golf, as Babe Didrickson and her colleagues travelled the amateur and professional circuits. Stories not involving Texans covered a range of sports from wrestling to auto racing, but most were about tennis. Regardless of location, golf was the most popular women's sport in these papers. The sports mentioned most were: (Golf, 56%; Tennis 12%; Basketball 11%; Bowling 5%; Softball 4%; Rodeo 2%; Others 10%). The articles are analyzed and placed in one of four categories (derived from the secondary literature) according to the major focus of their content, and the overall impression they created. The results indicate that 60% of the articles were neutral, 32.2% were good, 4.4% were ambivalent, and 3.4% were sexist. Most of the negative comments related to appearance, with hair, beauty, and physique getting the most mentions. Attire evoked little interest. Although commonly emphasized in secondary literature, marital status and motherhood received less than 6 percent of mentions while "women as frail or tragic," accounted for less than 2 percent. Outright references to "buxom beauties" were rare.

Scholars complain that photos most often depict women athletes in non-sport settings, provocatively posed and photographed from above, or in traditional "cheesecake" shots. This study does not support these contentions. Instead, supposedly rare action shots comprised the largest category -- 32 percent of all photos -- while another 26 percent showed women posing in their competition attire. Domestic

scenes and pictures of female athletes counselled or consoled by males, also supposedly commonplace, made up less than one percent of the sample, while cheesecake accounted for only 7 percent. Many of the remaining images were head shots, team pictures, and athletes admiring or receiving their trophies.

This research shows that the coverage of female athletes in the Texas press during the 1940s and 1950s was largely favourable and rarely possessed the sexist, demeaning characteristics described in the secondary literature. Thus, the widely accepted generalizations about media treatment of female athletes are not universally applicable. Clearly, the coverage of women athletes in the print media varies by time and place.