

MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES

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Changing Images of Women in Professional Basketball: From Femininity to Athleticism

The paper compares the publicity images of the All-American Red Heads, a women's barnstorming basketball team from 1936-1986, with those of the two new women's basketball leagues, the American Basketball League (ABL) and the Women's National Basketball League (WNBA). The questions posed are: Have publicity images of women basketball players changed? Can women players be publicized purely for their athletic skills or must they still be portrayed as "feminine-athletes"? A content analysis of yearbook and newspaper articles about the three teams was conducted in order to measure the number and types of references to gender and athleticism.

The All-American Red Heads, a women's version of the Harlem Globetrotters, was a successful barnstorming team from 1936 to 1986. They played only against men's teams in what was billed as the "battle of the sexes." Publicity primarily focused on the players' femininity and beauty rather than basketball skills. The Red Heads' popularity was attributed to their ability to combine serious playing with tricks and comedy that often contained sexual innuendo. Their games were characterized as basketball "shows."

Publicity for the ABL and WNBA focuses mainly on the women's basketball skills. NBA Properties President, Dick Wilts, stated in regard to the WNBA, "You're not going to see anything that's focused on gender—that's a conscious decision." True to his word, there are no gendered team names or uniforms. The WNBA and the ABL are both trying not to repeat the gender mistakes of earlier women's pro leagues. The 1978-1981 Women's Basketball League had team names such as the Milwaukee Does as the distaff side of the Milwaukee Bucks. The WNBA has also twist on male team names; for example, the Houston women's team is called the Comets after the men's team, the Houston Rockets. But care has been taken to make sure that the male and female team names appear equal in status. Neither the ABL nor the WNBA have special female uniform. This is unlike another failed women's league, the 1991 Liberty League in which the women wore tightly fitting spandex uniforms. NBA commissioner, David Stern, named a woman, Val Ackerman, as WNBA president, although Stern may still be seen by many as the power behind the WNBA, and the league itself envisioned as the weak, younger sister of the NBA. Also, the top three WNBA superstars—Rebecca Lobo, Lisa Leslie, and Sheryl Swoopes—are the personifications of 'traditional' female roles.

The ABL has not received the media coverage of the WNBA, nor has it tried to create marquee superstars. Instead the ABL focuses on recruiting the top women players and publicizing the excitement of the games. Perhaps the ABL has shown that women's basketball has finally come of age and that women players can be judged purely on their athletic skills and not as hyphenated "female-athletes."