

Women Redefining Success in Sports Communications

Deanna Weisenburger

Capstone

Christina Kelly-Henn

4/02/2024

## Women Redefining Success in Sports Communications

**Table of Contents**

Table of Contents .....	2
Introduction.....	3-4
Literature Review.....	4-8
Methodology.....	8-10
Results.....	11-17
Discussion.....	17-19
Conclusion.....	19-20
References.....	21-22

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the sports industry has undergone a transformation catalyzed by the emergence of women as influential forces shaping its landscape. This paper delves into the narratives of women who have broken the barrier and helped alter the face of sports. It seeks to shine a light on the different paths to success, emphasizing that there is no single route and a message that will resonate with young women looking to create their paths within this industry. Despite the strides made, the road to acceptance for women within the sports industry has been fraught with challenges. Historically, it has been perceived as a male-dominated field, and women have encountered struggles in getting entry into the field, advancement, and recognition. Yet, amidst these challenges, we are beginning to see a shift. Women are defying stereotypes and carving their way into the industry.

This paper advocates for women's full and equal participation in all facets of the sports industry. It underscores the bosses and obstacles that have impeded women's progress in sports. No longer should gender serve as a barrier to entry or a determinant of opportunity; instead, merit, skill, and passion should be what lines you up for success. Central to this study are the numerous obstacles women encounter within public relations and communications in the sports industry. While we know a lot about how crises are managed and how organizations respond, it's different when women are put front and center. In particular, this study will give a deeper understanding of women working in public relations and communications in the sports industry. From managing media inquiries to crafting strategic messaging, these women are vital in making these organizations run the way they do, even if their work is behind the scenes. Yet, they often

deal with a host of gender-specific challenges ranging from biases in the workplace to societal expectations regarding their roles and capabilities.

When we compare the involvement of women in sports communications from the 1970s to the present day, the transformation is remarkable. Women previously encountered significant barriers to entry-level positions and advancement within the sports industry, with minimal leadership opportunities. However, today, we are seeing a very different picture. Today, women increasingly assume influential positions in sports organizations, particularly in communications.

When we examine women working in sports at a glance in the 1970s versus today, we see how remarkable it has become. In the landscape of sports, the role of women has undergone profound shifts, reflecting broader societal changes and the relentless pursuit of gender equality. The 1970s marked a pivotal era characterized by the nascent movements for women's rights and the gradual dismantling of traditional gender norms. Fast forward to the present day, we are witnessing a vastly different landscape where women have not only solidified their presence but have also risen to positions of prominence and leadership across various facets of the sports industry.

This paper aims to shed light on strategies employed by women in public relations and communications to overcome obstacles and achieve success in the sports industry. Highlighting their contributions, I seek to inspire future generations of female communicators to pursue their passions and break the stigma. Only through women's full and equal participation can the sports industry realize its full potential as a domain.

## **Literature Review**

The historical and contemporary challenges women face in the sports industry are shown through various studies, providing insights into their experiences and the challenges women have faced growing their careers in this field.

The landscape of the sports industry has been entrenched by male dominance and systemic barriers that have perpetuated significant underrepresentation within the sports industry. Despite strides made since the 1970s towards gender equality, women remain markedly underrepresented in sports departments, constituting only approximately 13% of employees (Hardin, M, Shain, 2005). This study illuminates the enduring gender disparities within sports journalism and communication. However, women's tenure tends to be shorter, and opportunities for advancement into management positions still need to be explored. Many women also struggled to balance demanding careers with family responsibilities.

As the years went on, as a society, we began to see more women entering and staying in the sports communications field. The panel discussion hosted by USC's Annenberg School for Communication provided insightful perspectives from women who have succeeded in the male-dominated sports industry. Jennifer Prince, Chief Commercial Officer for the Los Angeles Rams, emphasized the power of women's voices and the importance of confidence. Olivia Cheng, senior director of marketing and brand engagement at LA28, shared her journey of persistence, including driving long distances for interviews, showcasing her unwavering dedication to her

career ( Hogue, M 2023). Other panelists, including Erin Bice and Savannah Foster, highlighted the significance of embracing opportunities, following passions, and being open to unexpected paths. The event resonated with attendees like USC freshman Sienna Claiborne, offering valuable guidance for those eager to embark on careers in the sports industry. The sports industry has caught the eye of women in the younger generation. Women must continue to show up for women of the younger generation to help inspire and guide the way into the sports communications industry.

The proportion of women in the global population and their representation in sports, both as practitioners in the sports industry, has increased. While nearly half of the world's population is female, their involvement in sports remains lower than that of men, with significant variations across countries. Despite a growing trend of female participation in sports, particularly in newer markets like esports, challenges persist in achieving gender equality (*Carmen Ruano, ESBS | The Role of Women in the Sports Industry*, 2022). Moreover, scientific research often overlooks the unique physiological aspects of female athletes. The article also highlights the increasing prominence of women in sports, evidenced by their earnings and fan engagement, as well as their representation in leadership positions within the sports industry. However, women still occupy a minority of top positions, with social stigma and lack of support cited as contributing factors. Education emerges as a critical driver of change, with initiatives encouraging women to pursue sports business careers and promote gender equity in the sector.

As time has evolved, we continue to see women in sports rising. With women's participation in sports proliferating and their share of revenue increasing, there is a clear trend

towards more significant investment in women in sports ( Brannan, n.d.). Societal attitudes and technological advancements are driving this evolution, with social media and streaming platforms providing greater visibility and breaking gender stereotypes. However, there is a need for more platforms that offer a safe space for young women to engage with sports content. Changes in societal attitudes also contribute to the growth of women's sports, with a more significant push to encourage girls and women to participate. The article emphasizes the role of leaders in promoting equality in women's sports through policies, diversity initiatives, increased funding, and media coverage. To capitalize on this opportunity globally, organizations and brands can create partnerships, leverage digital platforms, adapt marketing strategies, and support the development of women's sports programs.

The sports industry is a very male-dominated environment, and women face challenges every single day when it comes to inclusion compared to other sectors. Based on a survey of approximately 1,700 women in North America, findings indicate that women in sports administration encounter adverse effects from working in male-dominated environments, lack support for career advancement, and often bear a heavier burden in leadership roles ( *Inclusion and Fairness for Women in the Business of Sports* | McKinsey, n.d.). Despite positive individual experiences, women express lower perceptions of organizational fairness. These insights underscore the sports industry's need to prioritize inclusion efforts, considering the potential consequences of women feeling excluded, such as higher job attrition rates. The article advocates for organizational commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a strategic imperative, presenting actions to create fairer workplaces, enhance mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, foster supportive environments, and prioritize diversity in hiring and retention.

Ultimately, the article emphasizes the importance of leadership engagement and cultural transformation to achieve gender parity and create inclusive environments where women's voices are valued and their contributions are recognized.

### **Methodology**

The main idea of this capstone project is to investigate the experiences of women working in communications within the sports industry, focusing on the challenges they face, the strategies they employ to overcome obstacles, and their impact on the industry. A mixed-methods approach incorporated qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. Combining these methodologies allows for thoroughly examining this topic, capturing a wide range of perspectives, and providing robust evidence to support these conclusions.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured video interviews with women working in communications within the sports industry, while quantitative data was obtained via an online Google survey. This mixed-methods approach is well-suited to the project's objectives, as it combines in-depth personal narratives from women in the workforce with broader survey-based insights, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The video interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility during the conversation while addressing predetermined topics. Before the interviews, participants received ten open-ended questions to guide the discussion. The following are examples of some of these questions:



1. Can you share your journey and experiences in the sports industry, particularly in communications or public relations?
2. What inspired or motivated you to pursue a career in this field, and how did you navigate the challenges?
3. What is the significance of having women play a prominent role in the sports industry, especially in areas like PR and communications?
4. Can you discuss any specific barriers or obstacles you've faced as a woman in the sports industry, particularly in your role in communications or PR?
5. What sacrifices, if any, did you have to make to achieve success in your career?
6. How do you handle crises or challenging situations in your role, and have you encountered any unique challenges as a woman in these scenarios?
7. Could you provide examples of how you've seen the landscape of sports communication change with more women entering the field?
8. From your perspective, why do you believe it's essential for men to support and advocate for women in the sports industry, especially in roles like PR and communications?
9. Can you share any advice or insights for young women who aspire to pursue a career in sports communications or related fields?
10. How do you envision the future of the sports industry evolving with more excellent representation and involvement of women in critical roles like PR and communications?

This format provided flexibility while ensuring that the main topics were covered. The two video interviews conducted for this project lasted approximately 30- 50 minutes each. The interviews

were held via Zoom to accommodate participants' schedules, and both were recorded with the participants' consent.

The quantitative data was collected through an online survey distributed via Google Forms. The study aimed to gather insights from diverse participants, including individuals within and outside the sports industry. The questions were primarily multiple-choice, designed to collect demographic information, explore common challenges, and gauge attitudes toward women working in a predominantly male field. A total of 50 participants responded, providing valuable quantitative data for analysis.

Following the interviews, the data was analyzed by reviewing the content and identifying the key concepts and patterns. During the analysis, it became clear that both women discussed similar challenges from working in a male-dominated field, such as sports communications. They shared their experiences dealing with these challenges and their strategies to overcome the diversity.

The data from the Google survey was analyzed by calculating percentages to identify broader trends and patterns in the responses. The data from the Google survey was analyzed by calculating percentages to identify broader trends and patterns in the responses. By converting the results into percentages, we could easily compare different responses and understand the distribution of answers among the survey participants.

For the interviews, participants were selected through mutual connections, specifically targeting women with a background in sports communications. Invitations to participate were sent via email. For the Google survey, participants were recruited by posting the survey link on

Instagram and sending it to friends to share with their networks. This approach allowed for a broader reach and a diverse range of responses.

## **Results**

This section presents the results obtained from the qualitative and quantitative research methods described in the previous section. The findings are organized into two main parts: the insights from the semi-structured interviews with women in sports communications and the trends and percentages identified from the Google survey responses. Through this analysis, we aim to uncover common themes, challenges, and successful strategies women employ in the sports industry, particularly in communications roles within the sports industry. The results highlight the ongoing issues women face in this sector while also illustrating the progress that has been made and the potential pathways for future advancement. Additionally, the data underscore the importance of inclusion and support for women in sports communications, offering a foundation for discussing broader trends and opportunities within the industry.

The two video interviews conducted in this study offered distinct perspectives on working in the sports industry. The first interview was with Bree Nasti, the Development Coach within the NY Mets Player Development department and the outfield coach for Minor League Baseball's Low-A St. Lucie Mets. As one of the few women to hold a uniformed coaching role in

professional baseball, Bree's position is a rare and significant presence in the dugout. In addition to her coaching responsibilities, Bree is involved in developing individual player plans through ongoing communication and collaboration with other position coaches and performance staff. Throughout the interview, Bree's passion for women working in sports was palpable. For those who might not be familiar with baseball's culture, it's unusual to see a woman in a uniform on the field or in the dugout. The New York Mets are among a small group of professional baseball organizations that feature women in uniform, and Bree made this point clear from the start. She shared her views on the gender dynamics within professional sports, highlighting the barriers women face despite their deep connection to the sport: "Sometimes I think men in professional sports don't understand that we are just as deeply connected to the sport even though we didn't have the opportunity at a playing career in it; it doesn't make it any less significant" (B. Nasti, personal communication, March 28th, 2024).

A critical pattern that emerged from this interview was the importance of resilience and adaptability in navigating the sports industry. Bree emphasized that a career in sports requires flexibility and a willingness to embrace change: "Be willing to improvise, learn to adjust—that's a big part of being in sports. You have to be willing to go for the ride because that's how sports are" (B. Nasti, personal communication, March 28th, 2024). She mentioned that, in her role, she often communicates with male colleagues, many of whom respect her position and contributions. However, she also noted that women must work harder to build networks and support systems, as men have natural connections through teammates and coaches. Bree's advice to the next generation of women in sports centered on creating and maintaining strong connections with those they meet on their journey. She suggested that women must actively support each other and

become the voices advocating for their roles in the industry. While men often have established networks, women in sports must build these connections from the ground up. Bree's insights underscore the ongoing challenges and the progress being made as more women enter leadership roles in sports communications and coaching. Her perspective inspires and guides those looking to break through in a traditionally male-dominated field.

The second video interview was conducted with Natalie Jenkins, a seasoned communications professional who has worked across various sectors within sports and marketing. At the start of her career, Natalie took a position in professional sports, focusing on ticket sales. She later transitioned into marketing and communications roles. After having children, she shifted her focus to launching a nonprofit organization called the Student Hunger Drive in Charlotte, North Carolina. In coordination with multiple sports entities, this initiative engaged local high school students to support food pantries in the Charlotte area.

As her career progressed, Natalie received an opportunity to work with a former colleague who was launching a new digital network for the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). She was hired to manage internal marketing and communications for this brand-new digital network. This role was pivotal for Natalie, exposing her to the fast-paced world of public relations and media relations within college sports. Her ability to adapt and excel in this new environment, coordinating with the press and handling internal and external communications, allowed her to gain extensive experience in public relations and communications.

With this newfound expertise, Natalie was ready for her next career move. Colleagues and friends encouraged her to leverage her diverse experience by starting her own business. Taking

their advice, she launched Hip Step Marketing, an LLC where she could combine her marketing, public relations, and communications skills to serve a broader client base.

Natalie Jenkins, who grew up as a swimmer, was drawn to the vibrant atmosphere and camaraderie within the sports industry. It wasn't just the job opportunities that attracted her, but the people and the connections that sports facilitated. Even though the industry was primarily male-dominated when she began her career, she was determined to be a part of it. "To think that you can only have men work in public relations or communications is limiting; women are good communicators, and I think having that voice is important" (N. Jenkins, personal communication, March 30th, 2024).

Throughout the interview, Jenkins emphasized the importance of gaining experience across various roles, ultimately leading her to public relations and sports communications. She also highlighted the need for men to understand and support the needs of women, advocating for a more inclusive industry. Natalie is the current president of WISE (Women in Sports & Events), the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter. This chapter was the first among 25 chapters to have male representation on its board and advisory committee. Initially, this move caused some backlash from the national committee, but Natalie believed it was essential to involve men in leadership roles to foster a more collaborative and unified approach. She explained, "We're trying to even the playing field, not take over, and having those allies makes it more unified altogether" (N. Jenkins, personal communication, March 30th, 2024). Natalie Jenkins' journey is a powerful testament to the value of diverse experiences and the importance of building alliances with male colleagues. Her unwavering belief in the capabilities of women in the sports industry is a

testament to the talent and determination that women bring to the table. Despite the hurdles, she remains steadfast in her mission to create a more inclusive environment where women's voices are respected and their contributions are acknowledged.

The study aimed to explore public perceptions of women in sports communications, focusing on their challenges and attitudes toward their role in the industry. The survey, which included 13 multiple-choice questions, gathered responses from diverse participants, comprising men and women aged 18 to 55 from various backgrounds. By examining participants' views on women in the sports industry, the survey sought to uncover existing biases and identify the changes people hope to see in the future, providing valuable insights for promoting gender equality in sports communications.

Upon analyzing the survey data, it was found that 66% of participants were women, while 38% were men. Most respondents fell within the 25-34 age range, providing a glimpse into the opinions of a relatively young demographic. Regarding views on women in sports communications, responses were overwhelmingly positive, with no adverse reactions to the idea of women working in the field. Yet, 58% of participants strongly agreed that women face more challenges than men in this industry, with pay disparity identified as the most significant challenge. Interestingly, 78% of respondents believed the sports industry is progressing toward gender equality, while only 6% felt that little or no progress has been made. The survey also revealed that when asked about encouraging women to pursue a career in sports communications, the response was predominantly favorable, with only 2% discouraging women from entering the field.

However, one noteworthy statistic is that 38% of participants were neutral when asked how the general public perceives women in sports communications. This suggests that while attitudes are generally positive, there's still uncertainty about broader societal perceptions, indicating potential room for further awareness and change.

## **Discussion**

The results from the interviews and survey provide strong evidence supporting the argument that women are redefining success in sports communications despite facing persistent gender-based challenges. The personal experiences shared by Bree Nasti and Natalie Jenkins highlight the need for resilience and adaptability to succeed in a traditionally male-dominated industry. These insights align with the survey data, indicating that most respondents recognize the additional challenges women face, including pay disparity and societal biases. Women's experiences in sports communications, such as Bree and Natalie, prove that women are making strides in this field. Despite significant obstacles, their successes demonstrate that gender should not be a barrier to entry or advancement in sports communications. These stories are supported by the survey findings, which show a positive attitude toward women in the industry and an acknowledgment of ongoing progress toward gender equality.

Despite the insightful results from this study, it's crucial to consider potential sources of error that could affect the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The relatively small sample size of interview participants, consisting of only two women, might not adequately represent the broader population of women in sports communications. Although the survey



component had a higher response rate, it primarily included participants from a specific demographic—mostly 25 to 34-year-olds—which could limit the generalizability of the results across a wider age range and experience levels. Additionally, response bias could be an issue, as survey participants might have been inclined to provide socially desirable answers, reflecting what they thought researchers wanted to hear rather than their genuine opinions. Similarly, the interviewees might have selectively emphasized certain aspects of their experiences while downplaying others, introducing interview bias that could affect the interpretation of their narratives.

The research underscores important lessons for sports communications professionals in public relations, emphasizing the value of diversity, the need to combat gender bias, and the importance of fostering an inclusive workplace. Successful women in sports communications demonstrate that a mix of perspectives leads to more effective communication strategies. Thus, embracing gender diversity within teams is vital for sparking creativity and driving innovation. However, achieving this requires active efforts to identify and rectify gender biases, including offering women equal opportunities and ensuring they receive fair compensation for their work. To truly create an environment where everyone can thrive, practitioners must cultivate a supportive culture, ideally through mentorship programs and the promotion of male allies who champion their female colleagues' success. By following these principles, public relations practitioners can build stronger, more equitable teams in sports communications.

The study's results align with prior research, reinforcing specific established theories while adding new dimensions to others. The study's connections to the literature review reveal a

complex and evolving landscape for gender dynamics in the sports industry. A significant finding of the study is the persistent presence of gender disparities, particularly in pay. This observation echoes the earlier work of Hardin & Shain (2005), which documented these inequalities in sports journalism and communication roles. Their research highlighted the structural barriers that women face, especially in compensation and career advancement opportunities. The study's confirmation of these findings underscores the need for continued efforts to achieve true gender equality.

Beyond reinforcing existing theories, the study also deepens our understanding of inclusivity. Natalie's initiative to incorporate men into the Women in Sports and Events (WISE) Dallas-Fort Worth chapter is a testament to the power of collaboration in promoting gender equality. This approach, in line with McKinsey's research on inclusive leadership, suggests that achieving gender equity requires active participation from both genders. By encouraging men to be part of the conversation, WISE demonstrates that inclusivity fosters a culture of equality and teamwork, not just promoting women.

Moreover, the survey results, which show that 78% of respondents believe the sports industry is progressing toward gender equality, offer a glimpse of hope. These results echo the trends identified by Carmen Ruano (2022), who noted a gradual but positive shift in the roles and recognition of women in sports. This increasing optimism among industry professionals suggests that efforts to promote gender equality are gaining traction, with more individuals recognizing the value of a diverse and inclusive workplace.

However, despite these promising signs, challenges persist. The study also revealed that while there is a perception of progress, deep-seated biases, and systemic barriers still hinder full equality. For example, respondents pointed out that women often face higher scrutiny and are expected to work harder to prove themselves. These obstacles highlight the need for continued advocacy, mentorship, and policy changes to ensure that the sports industry not only talks about gender equality but also takes concrete steps toward achieving it.

In summary, the study's findings confirm existing research and offer new insights into the evolving dynamics of gender equality in the sports industry. While there is reason for optimism, the journey toward a truly equitable environment is ongoing, requiring a concerted effort from all stakeholders to address long-standing disparities and foster a more inclusive future for women in sports communications.

## **Conclusion**

Women's journey in sports communications has been marked by significant progress and ongoing challenges. This study highlights the stories of women who have broken through barriers and are redefining success in a traditionally male-dominated industry. Through qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, we've gained insights into the resilience and adaptability required to succeed in this field and the obstacles women continue to face.

The stories of Bree Nasti and Natalie Jenkins exemplify the diverse paths women are taking to establish themselves in sports communications. Their journeys underscore the need for robust

support networks, adaptability, and a collaborative spirit. While the industry is gradually opening up to women, the presence of gender-based hurdles, such as pay disparity and societal biases, indicates that much work remains.

Public relations practitioners can take valuable lessons from this study. Embracing diversity, addressing gender biases, and fostering inclusivity are critical steps toward creating a more equitable and supportive environment. The success of women in sports communications demonstrates that gender diversity contributes to more robust communication strategies and a more affluent workplace culture. However, potential sources of error, such as small sample sizes, response bias, and interview bias, suggest that further research with a broader participant base is needed to solidify these findings. By addressing these limitations, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of women in sports communications.

Despite these challenges, the overall sentiment remains optimistic. With 78% of survey respondents acknowledging progress toward gender equality, it's clear that the sports industry is on the right track. Including women in leadership roles and the increasing support from male allies signal a promising future where women can thrive in sports communications. To maintain this momentum, it's crucial to continue advocating for gender equality, implementing mentorship programs, and addressing structural barriers that hinder women's progress. By doing so, we can create an industry where success is determined by skill, passion, and dedication—not gender. As more women enter sports communications and make their mark, the industry will become more inclusive and dynamic, benefiting from the rich perspectives that only true diversity can offer.

## **References**

- Hardin, M., & Shain, S. (2005). Strength in Numbers? The Experiences and Attitudes of Women in Sports Media Careers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 804–819.
- Neupauer, N. C. (1998). Women in the Male Dominated World of Sports Information Directing: Only the Strong Survive. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 43(1), 27–30.
- Hogue, M. (n.d.). “women have superpowers”: *The experiences of women in the sports industry*. Annenberg Media.  
<https://www.uscannenbergmedia.com/2023/09/20/women-have-superpowers-the-experiences-of-women-in-the-sports-industry/>
- Carmen Ruano, *ESBS | The role of women in the sports industry*. (2022, September 26). SportBusiness.  
<https://www.sportbusiness.com/2022/09/carmen-ruano-esbs-the-role-of-women-in-the-sports-industry/>
- Brannan, D. (n.d.). *Council Post: How Leaders Can Support The Women’s Sports Industry*. Forbes. Retrieved April 3, 2024, from  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/05/03/how-leaders-can-support-the-womens-sports-industry/?sh=1b4cd799788c>
- Inclusion and fairness for women in the business of sports* | McKinsey. (n.d).  
[www.mckinsey.com](https://www.mckinsey.com).

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/technology-media-and-telecommunications/our-insights/the-business-of-sports-and-the-quest-for-inclusion-for-women>

