Gender Equality in Sports
“The story of women in sports is a personal story, because nothing is more personal than a woman’s bone, sinew, sweat, and desire, and a political story, because nothing is more powerful than a women’s struggle to run free.”¹ Women’s history depicts a continuous battle for equality. From the beginning women have fought for their right to be considered equal to men. With time, women’s rights evolved, including the right to play sports. However, it was believed that a typical woman’s daily activities involved being at home, cleaning, cooking, and caring for the children, not on a playing field. For this reason, women who participated in sports were frowned upon. Not only were sports considered unfeminine, but women who played were discriminated against and considered a homosexual. This was due to the fact that people believed to play sports one needed strength, endurance, and skill, all characteristics of men not women. Therefore, is there gender equality in sports? The history of women in sport includes many great athletes, several of whom have left a legacy for future generations. They proved to the world that all women are capable of anything. Furthermore, in the Ancient Roman times, only men could participate in the Olympic Games. Nowadays, however, the Olympics generate the most gender equality. Women can participate in the majority of events and receive an adequate amount of media coverage. To help improve the gender equality in sports, both women and men have formed organizations, as well as implementing laws – all resulting with benefits. Therefore, great gains have occurred for women in sport because of female athletes, the Olympics, and government laws and associations.

The archaic female stereotypes make it challenging for women to gain equality in sports. People have been competing in athletics since before recorded history. However, there is barely any mention of women participating. In fact, any woman found in an arena during the Ancient Roman times was escorted out and charged with a crime or sentenced to death. They felt there was no reason for women to play sports, they were meant to care for their husband and family. A “young woman’s future role as a wife and mother was of far greater importance than any championship she may ever win through competition.”^2 Unlike the men, sports could not take a female athlete anywhere in life because there was no where for them to play. Additionally, the Roman’s felt “athletics [were] far too dangerous and unsuitable for females.”^3 Therefore, “it is indecent that the spectators should be exposed to the risk of seeing the body of a woman being smashed before their eyes…her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks.”^4 The female body was not built to participate in strenuous activities; consequently it is not right to see a wife or mother suffer. Furthermore, women are not capable of playing athletics. Societies continue to feel that “[w]omen are supposed to be pretty, feminine, home-loving, and rather weak. They are not expected to be plain, muscular, strong, and dedicated to sporting careers.”^5 Nowadays, there is a wider variety of sport activities for females; however, primarily in those sports considered feminine. This is a direct result of the stereotype that suggests women do not possess sport abilities. Thus, men still play a greater number of sports than women making gender equality not entirely attained.

As a result, the stereotype of male superiority is still recognized today. Men feel that they have the skills needed to be a successful athlete: strength, endurance and coordination. Consequently, women constantly go unrecognized; including salaries and coaching. “Men [receive] more prize money than women. Bobby Riggs pronounced that it was because ‘[men] play a better game…”6 Riggs is a well-known tennis player, but is especially known for his sexist and stereotypical comments. The idea that men are better athletes is depicted in athlete salary ranges; for professional athletes, there is a large difference between male and female athletes. In the National Basketball Association the highest salary is more than 27 million dollars7, whereas, the maximum a WNBA (Women’s National Basketball Association) player can make is approximately 30 thousand dollars.8 This salary is equal to and sometimes less than the least talented male basketball players. An athlete’s salary reflects on how the world will view them. If female salaries are a lot lower, it will make it difficult for them to be accepted. However, the majority of people believe women are not as capable or talented as male athletes; justifying their salaries. Overall, “[women] are routinely given the least convenient practice times, the worst facilities and equipment, the least experienced teachers, trainers, and coaches, and less funding and sponsorship, and in some sports they receive no media attention at all.”9 Female athletes do not deserve the same benefits as male athletes, until their game improves. Accordingly, although female stereotypes still exist today for the

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women in sport, several female athletes have been able to overcome them, becoming heroic role models for generations of girls.

Suzanne Lenglen, Gertrude Ederle, Billie Jean King, and Michelle Wie have all helped women obtain great gains in the hope of gender equality in sport. There have been many great female athletes, but there are only several who stand out for their achievements and are still recognized in the athletic world today. These “[women] have had to climb a mountain of male prejudice”\(^\text{10}\) to become successful athletes. During the earlier days of sports, men felt women should not be participating in sports because of male superiority. However, women did not feel the same way; they decided themselves who is capable of playing sports.

“Female athletes repossess their bodies. Told that they’re weak, they developed strength. Told that certain sports are wrong for them, they decide for themselves what’s right. Told that their bodies are too dark, big, old, flabby, or wrinkly to be attractive to men, they look at naked women in locker rooms and discover for themselves the beauty of actual women’s bodies in all their colors, shapes, and sizes. Told that certain sports make women look ‘like men,’ they notice the truth: working out doesn’t make them look like men; it makes them look happy. It makes them smile. It makes them radiate health and power. It makes them feel good.”\(^\text{11}\)

Women took the men’s stereotypes and turned them into something positive because only they knew the truth about themselves and could put the male prejudice aside; men did not know anything about the female body and its capabilities.

Suzanne Lenglen, a French tennis player, who grew up in the greater Paris area began playing tennis as a child to build body strength, after suffering from chronic asthma. In her early days of tennis, her father trained her. When World War I broke out

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it put her career on hold. After a four year break, the Wimbledon Championships were on once again. Lenglen played Dorothea Douglas Chambers, a seven time winner, in the final match; her first Grand Slam Victory. The match was later noted to be one of the hallmarks in tennis history. In a February 1926 tournament, Lenglen played her only match against Helen Wills. Many consider this match her most memorable, winning 6-3, 8-6. She continued to win matches against the most talented players, proving her abilities. Moreover, she was the “first major female tennis star to turn professional, being paid $75,000 to tour the United States.” By the end of her career, Lenglen won 81 singles titles, 73 doubles titles, and 8 mixed doubles titles. She remains the only player to have won the Wimbledon singles, doubles, and the mixed doubles championships in the same year. Lastly, her total number of Grand Slam wins is 25. Suzanne Lenglen contributed to and did outstanding things for the tennis industry. Previously, there had been little interest in female matches, but she filled the stadiums with her exhilarating style. “She was a gifted and brilliant player who used extremely agile footwork, speed and a deadly accurate shot to dominate female tennis for seven straight years.” Lenglen had an extremely gifted tennis talent, however she shocked the world when “she appeared at the Wimbledon with her dress revealing bare forearms and cut just above the calf;

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while all other players competed in outfits covering nearly all of the body.”

Lenglen introduced glamour to the tennis court and to the rest of the sport world. She let women know that it was alright and possible to look pretty while playing sports and to feel good about yourself. Today, she is still considered “to be the most brilliant tennis player in the world.” In 1978, she was elected to the International Tennis Hall of Fame. Suzanne Lenglen tennis talent and outfit styles paved the way for future generations of girls and women.

The first women to ever swim the English Channel, was Gertrude Ederle, an American swimmer, in 1926. “She broke the existing record time (set by a man) by two hours.” This was not only a huge accomplishment for Gertrude herself, but for all women. It was one of the first times in history where a woman beat a male time record. Additionally, she “won international acclaim as [a] great athlete and hardly anyone made a fuss over the fact that [she was] a women.” For women not to be criticised by men is a great gain for women. It meant that men finally realized that women are just as talented as they are, and in some circumstances even better.

American tennis player Billie Jean King is best remembered for the Battle of the Sexes match in 1973. The match was against Bobby Riggs, a top tennis player at the time. “In 1973 he took on the role of male chauvinist and, claiming that the women’s game was so inferior to the men’s game even a 55 year-old like him could beat the

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current top female players,” thus challenging King. On September 20th the *Battle of the Sexes* was watched by 30, 492 spectators and a worldwide television audience estimated at 50 million people. This was a highly publicized event, especially for women; it developed recognition and respect for female tennis players.

However, “[t]his was not mere tennis, not just a game or gamble. This was the *Battle of the Sexes*, and at stake, it seemed, was nothing less than the future of women. When King won (6-4, 6-3, 6-3), she didn’t win just for herself. She proved to men—and to dubious women—that women can compete with men, and win.”

This was the most significant event in the history of women in sport and it all depended on one woman. King did not disappoint the female population, coming out on top and “opened the way for women to earn a reasonable living in sports.” Women had never benefited from an equal amount of prize money or salary and thus becoming a great gain. This match, however, was not Billie Jean King’s only accomplishments. “During her career, she won 12 Grand Slam singles titles and 25 Grand Slam doubles titles;” both great accomplishments. Through the years, “she developed a reputation as an aggressive, hard-hitting, net-rusher, with excellent speed and a highly-competitive nature.”

Similarly, Kings characteristics were much like Lenglen’s, and both were considered the greatest female tennis players. As well, King was not only known for forming the foundation for women in sport, but she was an activist for women’s rights. Throughout

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her career she constructed campaigns that would benefit women in sport; this includes a
movement for equal prize money in both the men’s and women’s Open games. Female
athlete’s financial status did improve, but was not quite equal. “In 1972, King won the
US Open but received US$15,000 less than the men’s champion.”27 Nevertheless, in the
1973 for the first time ever, the US Open offered equal prize money. This was due to the
fact that King had announced in the previous year that she would not return to play
without equal prize money. Furthermore, “King was instrumental in establishing the
women’s tennis tour in the 1970s;”28 an opportunity for the best female players to
compete and showcase their abilities. King went on to receive an award in 2001 from
“GLAAD-an organization devoted to reducing discrimination against gays, lesbians, and
bisexuals-for furthering the visibility and inclusion of the community in her work.”29
Billie Jean King herself and her life achievements were gains for equality in sport;
without her hard work, women today would not benefit from salary pay or recognition.

Nowadays, there is one female athlete that stands out compared to the rest. This
is a 16 year-old golf player. She was born in Honolulu, Hawaii and began playing at the
age of four. In 2000, Michelle Wie became the youngest player to qualify for a USGA
amateur championship.30 She was definitely a star in the making; the world was
expecting great things. At the age of twelve she became the youngest player to qualify
for an LPGA-Ladies Professional Golf Association-event. Although, this is a great
accomplishment, Wie “is considered the second best female golfer in the world, and has

been invited to play in PGA tournaments,”

three to date. To be asked to play in the PGA, Professional Golfers’ Association, an athlete must be a well accomplished player. Wie’s style and powerful drive has made her known throughout the golf industry. The “[s]ports media calls her The Big Wiesy, a play on [Ernie] Els’ nickname of The Big Easy” because their style is similar. Els and many other PGA players have been found admiring this young star. Fred Couples was amazed by her talent, stating, “When you see her hit a golf ball…there’s nothing that prepares you for it. It’s just the scariest thing you’ve ever seen.” Davis Love III also believes that “she probably has one of the best golf swings [he’s] ever seen, period.” For a woman to receive the opportunity of playing with the men is astonishing. They have finally looked past gender and saw how great Wie is at golf. Lenglen, Ederle, King, and Wie are all extremely talented athletes, whose contributions have resulted in many triumphs in the face of adversity.

The mass media favours male athletes over female athletes and portray the men as superior. The public very rarely reads about women in sport. In fact, “today, in a marked improvement over most daily papers, devotes between 15 and 20% of its sports pages to women,” no where near a fair share of 50% each, for both men and women. However, when they are present in the media, what we hear or see is extremely bias. “Information about women athletes is filtered through male writers, photographers, broadcasters, and publishers: approximately 9, 650 of the nation’s 10, 000 print and broadcast sports

Considering the majority of sport advertising organizations are governed by men, it is natural for them to produce more advertisement on men. Furthermore, with men constructing the interviews they instead “[focus] on the female athletes appearance and marital and maternal status than on her training, performance, and achievements.” Journalists would rather discuss about a women’s personal life than their sport career because their achievements could possibly be better than male athletes. Men are not only depicted superior in write ups, but also in photographs. “[S]ports photographs show convincingly the continuing emphasis on the distinctions between female and male athletes.” They “do not simply create images of women or girls, men or boys; they construct differences between female and males and address viewers as thought the differences are natural and real.” With the viewers believing what they are told on a continuous basis, it makes them believe that women should not only be playing sports, but they physically cannot. This is what the media is trying to do, “focusing on female difference is a political strategy that places women in a position of weakness.” By portraying women inferior to men, it makes it challenging for them to improve the situation they are in. They will not be able to stand out or receive the recognition they deserves while men are in power.

Altogether, “[m]edia coverage of sport today does not simply exclude and ignore women, trivialize or marginalize women, deathleticize or deny power to women; it constructs women and men and the differences

between the two in such a way as to present gender differences as an important and natural feature of social life.”

Although, the world watches women on a daily basis being persecuted against and treated as though they are not important, societies continue to do nothing; they ignore the fact as though it is not present. Without the media believing in or helping the female athletes, there will never be the chance of gender equality in sport.

The Olympics nowadays contain the most gender equality than any sporting event. Considering when the Olympics first began and women were forbidden to even enter the stadium, equality has definitely advanced. However, when women were first given the permission to participate in the Olympics, the only sports they could play were the feminine sports. Tennis was one of the first sports to be introduced. At the 1908 Olympics, women first officially competed in both individual and pairs skating. Allowing the women to skate as pairs is quite surprising because it meant that a man and a woman were put together to compete as a team. With men believing that the two genders should not be playing with each other, makes this decision unusual. On the contrary, it allowed the female athletes to show their talent and that they could in fact keep up with the male competitors. In addition, figure skating today is the only sport to be dominated by women. Moreover, the next events to be added to the Olympics for women were swimming and diving in 1912. The Olympic swimming teams consist of highly competitive and well trained female swimmers. Track and field was implemented

in 1928.\textsuperscript{44} Similar to the swimming teams, the track teams have been extremely successful and dominate in the games. The women’s running times are less than a second slower then the men’s. More recently society can see how much the equality has increased. “In the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia, women participated in all the same sports as men, except boxing and wrestling.”\textsuperscript{45} This decision could be due to the fact that the International Olympic Committee felt those two events were too dangerous for women to compete in. However, the IOC finally “recognized that women are just as capable as men of doing strenuous things with their bodies,”\textsuperscript{46} and women’s wrestling was at last “included in the Olympic Competition schedule for the first time”\textsuperscript{47} ever in the 2004 Athens Olympics. Furthermore, wrestling was not the only physically demanding sport introduced to women into the Olympics. In the 1998 Nagano Winter Games women’s ice hockey debuted for the first time. Although, all the participating teams were well playing teams, team USA and team Canada were the two dominant teams. Consequently, they were the teams playing in the Gold Medal final; team USA won the game 3-1.\textsuperscript{48} Women’s ice hockey debut was well waited for and all the teams played remarkably. They let the world know that they had the right to be there on the ice representing their country. For the first time women could participate in a sport that was always restricted to men because of its \emph{masculinity}; if a woman played a \emph{masculine} sport then some considered her not to be a lady. Nonetheless, men need to understand, and

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\item \textsuperscript{46} Andrew Langley. \textit{Sport and Politics}, Vero Beach, FL.: Rourke Enterprises, Inc., 1990. p 39.
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perhaps for the first time they realized that “[w]hile playing sports, women use their bodies to do as they please. If in that process female bodies look unladylike—if they become bruised or bloody or simply unattractive—that seems irrelevant. Women own their bodies.” And that in the end is an incomparable gain that women could have ever received. It meant that for once they were not seen as “pretty objects” that could be hurt easily and not withstand any physical endurance. For the first time they were seen as athletes, and that truly is an accomplishment.

The government laws and associations had an opposing effect on gender equality in sports; organizations and separate spheres of women’s physical education and athletic departments collapsed, and there was a reduction in female leadership and coaching positions. When the government implemented Title IX—a law that allows no discrimination against any sex while participating in federal funded sports—in the schools systems it created negative effects. Prior to Title IX, schools had separate physical education departments for men and women. Title IX placed mergers on “men’s and women’s physical education and athletic departments in practically all educational institutions.” Although, many believed this would not be a problem, it resulted in female educators being demoted or fired.

“[T]he mergers caused the NAGWS [National Association for Girls and Women in Sport] to lose its authority over rules and officiating. Without women in positions of leadership who believed in the authority, control, rules, and officiating techniques of women, men moved to rules and officiating most like their own and selected men to officiate.”

“By 1990, 84 percent of women’s intercollegiate programs were headed by men. More than 30 percent of women’s programs had no women at all involved in the administrative structure.”\textsuperscript{52} Thus women had now lost everything they had and gained; not helping equality in sport. Furthermore, “[t]he ramifications of Title IX were central to the rise and fall of the women’s manipulated model of men’s athletics. It represented a two-edged sword not only to female educators […], but also to the AIAW.”\textsuperscript{53} The Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) was an organization that governed women’s collegiate athletics in the United States. It also administered national championships. AIAW quickly felt the pressure from Title IX and had to make changes to their policies. However, while making alterations, the association was becoming more like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), who governs competition in a fair, safe, equitable and sportsmanlike manner. Therefore, they sought for an alliance with NCAA, but unfortunately it was unsuccessful and the AIAW collapsed. AIAW was one of the most important steps in gaining equality and because of Title IX it led to its demise, therefore how is Title IX really helping women in sport? Moreover, women now “play in men’s gym, under male rules, male officiating, male coaching, and, too often, male harassment”\textsuperscript{54} and “[m]any prominent universities still refuse to comply,”\textsuperscript{55} thus not benefiting the women. The new associations and government laws produced problems instead of helping women in sport. Nevertheless, although problems occurred, more opportunities were produced for women, ultimately being a great gain.


Great gains for women in sport have occurred because of the establishment of government laws and associations. In the beginning of time, the world was led by men; they made the rules and laws to live by. These laws included the ban of women from participating in sports. However, when societies became civilized, laws changed and so did the people in power. Very few women were in a position of power. The Equal Rights Amendment was one of the United States first government laws that benefited women. Although it is broken into three sections, the first one only applies to helping women. Section one states, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” Therefore, women can do the same things as the men because they have equal rights. Although this law essentially allowed women to participate in sports being a benefit, it did not stop the discrimination. Female athletes continued to receive derogatory comments about playing athletics. Nevertheless, the sexist comments would soon stop with the implantation of a new law.

In 1972 the government introduced a law into the Education Amendments. The law was named Title IX and it was going to bring great things for women. Title IX reads, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” Consequently, female athletes would not be suffering from discrimination and they would be receiving all the benefits that the male athletes have experienced their entire life. Following the

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introduction of Title IX “there was an immediate increase in the number of women in collegiate competition from about 8000 in 1967 to more than 60,000 in 1974.”58 Title IX allowed more women to participate in sports, as well as, more women began playing because the law gave them the hope that they could now succeed in sports; they do not have to grow up to be a typical woman. Additionally, collegiate sports were not the only ones to have an increase in female participation. “More than 2.4 million girls (one-third of all female students) were playing high school sports, up 800 percent since 1971.”59 These statistics prove that girls everywhere wanted to play sports, but were never given the opportunity, and Title IX allowed this to occur. Moreover, it gave these young women the hope of playing competitively now and later in university or college; female athletes for the first time could receive college athletic scholarships,60 also created by Title IX. This is a great gain for women because they now have the opportunity of receiving something they once believed they could never obtain. Additionally, it meant “that a girl who [was always] an outstanding athlete may have the opportunity for scholarship money as an outstanding boy athlete.”61 Again, receiving something that the men could only dream about is remarkable for women. However, although government laws have benefited women in sport greatly, there have been several organizations who have dedicated themselves solely to improve gender equality in sports.

One of the first organizations to be formed was the Division for Girl’s and Women’s Sports (DGWS). As time passed the DGWS decided to change their name,

evolving into the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport (NAGWS). The association’s mission is “to develop and deliver equitable and quality sport opportunities for all girls and women through relevant research, advocacy, leadership development, educational strategies, and programming in a manner that promotes social justice change.”62 Therefore this organization is not solely trying to get gender equality in sports; they are teaching girls and women the fundamental skills needed to succeed in both the athletic world and in life. NAGWS is the first and only association to include these goals for women. In addition to teaching women these important life skills, they give out awards to “individuals who continue to make great efforts in the journey toward equality for all girls and women in sport”63 and scholarships. Individuals who have been helping to gain equality in sports and have contributed to make the world an equal place to live in can be nominated for any NAGWS award or scholarship. Throughout their years as an association they have managed to increase programs and services, to maximize the utilization of member’s professional expertise, to increase and diversify funding sources and opportunities, to advocate for U.S Government laws and policies, and to raise awareness of how legal, political, and social justice issues impact all girls and women in sport.64 The NAGWS has done great things for the female population and without its hard efforts women would not have the advantages they now obtain.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was another organization formed that would eventually help women in sport. The NCAA in the beginning was

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primarily a discussion group and rulemaking body. In 1980 it began administrating women’s athletics programs when Divisions II and III established ten championships for 1981-82. A year later, they adopted an extensive governance plan to include women’s athletics programs, services and representation. They expanded the women’s championships program with the addition of nineteen events. With the NCAA working hard to produce more programs and championships for female athletes it will give them more opportunities to showcase their athletic abilities and to be seen by universities and/or colleges. By allowing the women’s sport world to develop, there has been a significant gain for women.

The third and final organization that has helped benefit women in sport is the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW). It was founded in 1971 and its objective was to govern collegiate women’s athletics in the United States and to administer national championships. At the time it had over 280 schools as members. Students within the association could transfer freely between schools and programs and were initially forbidden to offer scholarships to prevent unfair advantages. However, the AIAW organized and administered all competitions at the regional and national levels; in 1981 they organized 41 national championships. Similar to the NCAA, these competitions allow the athletes to explore and improve their talents. As well, hopefully they will improve their skills to create a greater possibility for an opportunity of playing on a collegiate team. The AIAW “was one of the biggest stepping stones for women’s

It is evident that the Equal Rights Amendments, Title IX, and each organization have helped in the development of equality in sport. Therefore, the associations and government laws were the most important part in creating opportunities for women.

Despite archaic stereotypes Suzanne Lenglen, Gertrude Ederle, Billie Jean King, and Michelle Wie all became successful female athletes and hero’s to women around the globe. The Olympics has become the only sporting event with the most gender equality. Associations and government laws have created more opportunities for female athletes. Although it is evident that inequality exists, female athletes, the Olympics, and associations and government laws demonstrate the great gains obtained in the fight for gender equality in sports. It is important for women to realize that, “if [women] do not define [them]selves for [them]selves, [they] will be defined by others.” Women around the world should celebrate and be proud of their achievements because together women have earned a spot in the athletic world.

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