



POLITICS IN SPORTS MEDIA

January 2022



The University of Texas at Austin
Center for Sports Communication & Media
Moody College of Communication

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The Center for Sports Communication & Media brings together interests in the instruction, practice, and scholarship of sports journalism, broadcasting, media production, human communication, and more. It serves the mission of the Moody College of Communication and The University of Texas at Austin through its commitment to the highest quality of teaching, research, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The Center sponsors the Sports Media undergraduate minor, provides funding support for affiliate research, partners with organizations in sports media, and produces programming such as the Dan Jenkins Medal for Excellence in Sportswriting, the McGarr Symposium on Sports and Society, and the Frank Deford Lecture in Sports Journalism.

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POLITICS IN SPORTS MEDIA: AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR ANNUAL REPORT

Michael L. Butterworth, Natalie Brown-Devlin, and Jennifer McClearen

TIME magazine's decision to [name Simone Biles](#) its 2021 "Athlete of the Year" centers the Olympic icon at a cultural and political intersection. A Black woman, who is the [most decorated athlete](#) in U.S. gymnastics history, became one of the most vocal advocates for mental health while also [processing the abuse](#) suffered by disgraced physician, Larry Nassar. In selecting Biles, *TIME* acknowledged the backdrop of "Black Lives Matter" protests in 2020 and the increasing chorus of voices within sports seeking to address mental, as well as physical, health. "So when a Black female athlete like Biles takes visible steps to safeguard her own mental and physical health, to indicate that it's worth protecting," [the magazine noted](#), "that action carries a special power." Indeed, given this context and the fact that both praise and criticism were directed at Biles, few other athletes can better represent the convergence of race, gender, health, and electoral politics.

We begin with Biles because *TIME*'s announcement provides a fitting invitation to consider the important issues noted above. Other athletes in 2021 provided a symbolic echo, from [Naomi Osaka](#) to [Serena Williams](#), from [Sha'Carri Richardson](#) to [Raven Saunders](#). And, while these women of color spotlight the politics of sports in particular ways, they are far from the only examples. In 2021 alone, sports and politics converged at international events like the [2020 Euro](#) and the [Tokyo Olympics](#), in domestic struggles over [legislation about name, image, and likeness](#) (NIL) for college athletes and the [exclusion of trans athletes](#) in high school sports, and in the intersection of [electoral politics in Georgia](#) and [the reactions by athletes](#) to the capitol insurrection on January 6. In short, after years of hearing that sports and politics do not (or should not) mix, it has become impossible to ignore the multiple points of convergence between them.

The ubiquity of politics in sports, and sports in politics, provides much of the motivation for this report. More than this, we seek to respond to the lingering questions about the nature of this intersection and whether it is possible or even desirable to "[stick to sports](#)." In "Politics in Sports Media," the Center for Sports Communication & Media aims to provide an annual assessment of political coverage in mainstream sports media. Our hope is that sports media professionals, sports fans, and sports scholars alike will find value in our findings and observations.

We begin with two important definitions: 1) what counts as "political"; and 2) what does "mainstream sports media" mean? First, for many observers, "politics" is most often associated with matters of campaigns, elections, and governance. We agree these are obvious examples of "political" matters; however, our definition is far more expansive, including

matters that focus on power, resources, and equity. From this perspective, it is not possible to separate politics from discussions of identity, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. In addition, we recognize that politics are embedded in sports' symbolic emphasis on national identity and the interdependence of sports organizations, media, and business. And, while this is certainly true around the world, we have limited our focus in this report to sports media coverage in the United States.

Second, defining "mainstream sports media" is equally complicated. There are almost too many sports media outlets to count, including those on television, radio, print sources, websites, social media channels, podcasts, and more. In the report's first two sections, our analysis is contained in order to keep our findings intelligible and we have limited our focus to ESPN, NBC Sports, CBS Sports, FOX Sports, Yahoo! Sports, and Bleacher Report. We have also included the sports-affiliated network brands of NBC Sports, CBS Sports, and FOX Sports. Yahoo! Sports and Bleacher Report, meanwhile, are among the most visited ([or even the most visited](#)) sports websites. Knowing that a comprehensive review of all major outlets was not feasible, we determined these media brands provided a strong foundation for our analysis. In the final section of the report, our authors draw on a range of sources based on the specific area of focus for each contribution.

In total, the "Politics in Sports Media" report contains three sections:

- Survey data that show how sports media consumers define and react to political content in sports.
- Survey data that show how sports media consumers perceive leading sports media brands and their mix of sports and political content.
- Case study commentaries that provide critical evaluations of six stories featuring politics and sports.

Our hope is that this report provides timely, accessible, and provocative information and insights. The relationship between sports and politics is neither new nor temporary, and we offer "Politics in Sports Media" to help readers observe, interpret, and critique the many ways this relationship shapes our understanding of 2021 and beyond. ■

In short, after years of hearing that sports and politics do not (or should not) mix, it has become impossible to ignore the multiple points of convergence between them."

SURVEYS

Created by saxon
from the Noon Project

INTRODUCING SURVEY 1: AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF SPORTS MEDIA POLITICAL CONTENT

Natalie Brown-Devlin

Sports communication scholars recognize that the [academic examination of the field](#) includes numerous subdisciplines. For instance, sports communication scholars have studied the intersection of sports and politics by analyzing how issues of [race](#), [gender](#), [militarism](#), [sexuality](#), [patriotism](#), and more have quite literally played out on the field of competition.

The debate surrounding the intersection of sports and politics, of course, has not simply been confined to academic circles, alone. Rather, fans, athletes, and key media figures have flamed the debate of whether sports and politics should mix at all. Some key [figures](#) have expressed that sports and politics should not mix, while [others](#) have recognized that sports and politics have long been intertwined.

Yet, scholars and sports media viewers potentially possess differing opinions of what constitutes political content within sports media channels. For instance, is media coverage of the construction of a new stadium political in nature? Scholars would likely say yes, but would sports media viewers agree? This discussion often refers to the intersection of sports and politics in rather abstract terms, as there have been no concrete outlines of how sports media viewers, themselves, define political content. As such, for scholars to analyze sports and politics, we must first ask sports media viewers, “What sports media content is political?”

Center for Sports Communication & Media scholars conducted this initial survey to determine what content

sports media viewers defined as political. 524 respondents who self-identified as sports fans participated in the survey and rated a list of 28 topics on a scale from 1 (Not political at all) to 7 (Very political). Overall, findings suggested that the content topics that respondents rated as the most political were topics involving political candidates or elected officials. The overall sample also scored athlete protests as one of the most political topics.

Notably, respondents rated transgender rights as one of the most political topics; however, they rated overall issues related to gender more neutrally. This finding should likely be contextualized with the large number of [legislative bills](#) that have been introduced in state legislatures pertaining to transgender athlete participation during the past year.

Participants were also asked, specifically, if they were comfortable with athletes sharing their political beliefs. While a majority of survey respondents (56.5%) answered “no,” the results produced interesting insights when analyzed according to political party identification. Respondents who identified as either Republicans or Independents were against athlete protests, whereas respondents who identified as Democrats supported athlete protests. Interestingly, Republican respondents seemed more unified on their answer to this question, as nearly 85% reported being unsupportive of athlete protests, while 68% of Democrats supported athlete protests. These results provide a stark contrast to the [results obtained by ESPN](#) a year ago, which found that 71% of sports fans supported athletes speaking out.

Lastly, participants were asked to reflect on what is good and/or bad about politics and sports mixing. Their qualitative responses generated two word clouds, split according to participants’ political party identification. These results showcased key insights pertaining to how sports media viewers define the intersection of sports and politics.

Taken as a whole, this survey provides insights into how sports media viewers see the intersection of sports and politics and the extent to which they perceive a variety of topics as being political. ■

Soldiers in the Georgia National Guard stand at attention with Atlanta Braves players during a performance of the “Star Spangled Banner” during a Fox Sports South “Tribute to the Troops” ceremony in 2013.

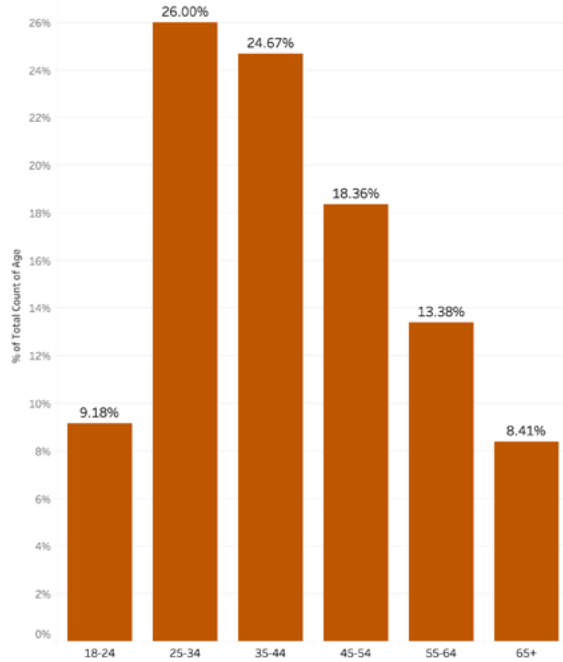


Sgt. 1st Class Gerard Brown/Wikimedia Commons

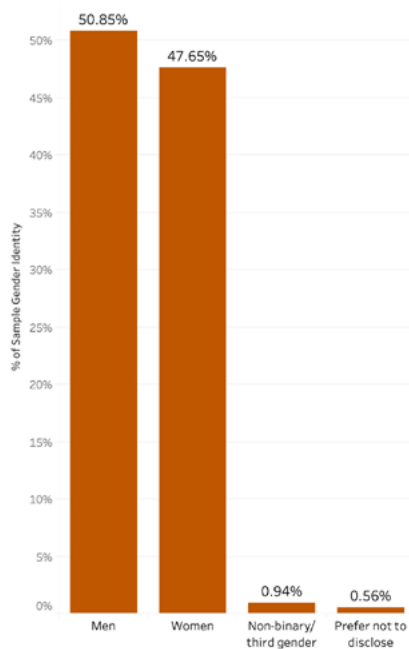
SURVEY 1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

While scholars often wrestle with topics they feel exist at the intersection of sports and politics, they typically do not examine the topics *sports media viewers* find political. As such, researchers surveyed 524 participants from the United States who self-identified as sports fans, using the Prolific panel service in December 2021. Participants reported consuming sports-related content for approximately 10.9 hours a week and reported consuming live sports content for approximately 8.9 hours per week. The charts below highlight the demographics of the sample.

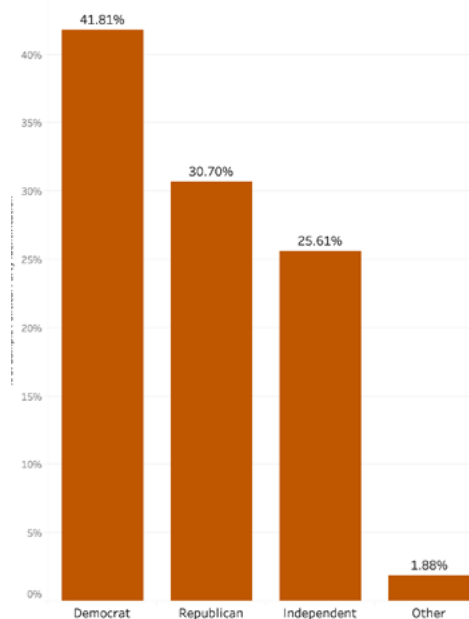
Age Range



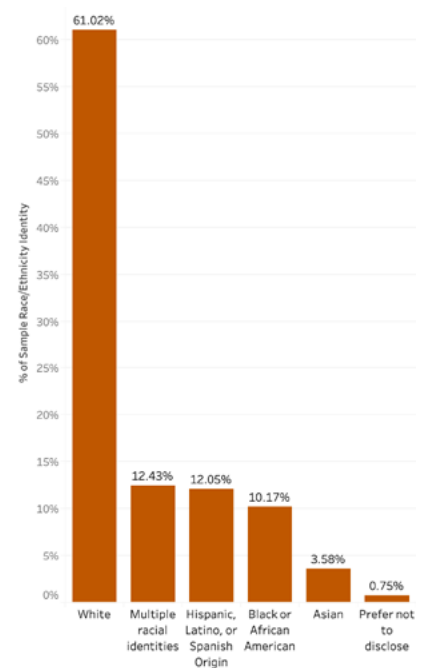
Sample Gender Identity



Political Party Identification



Sample Racial Identity

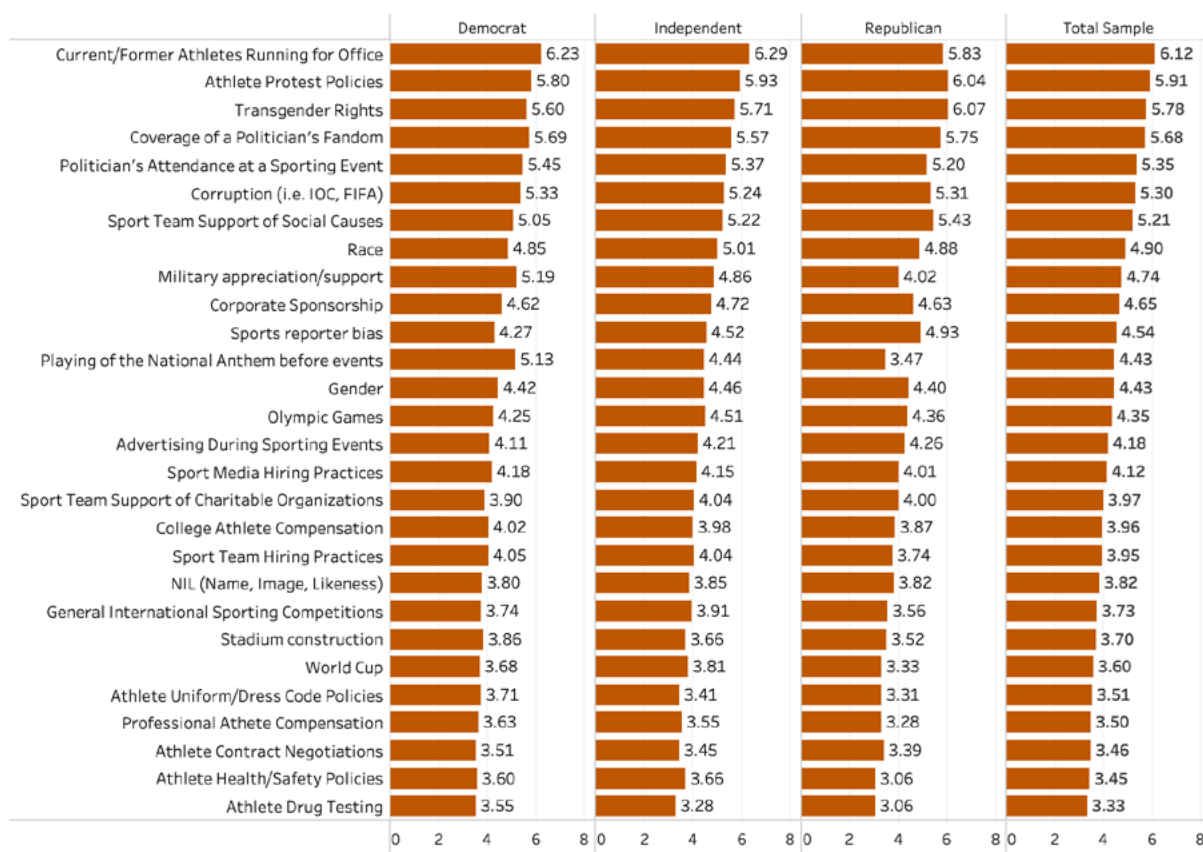


WHAT SPORTS MEDIA CONTENT TOPICS ARE VIEWED AS POLITICAL?

To evaluate the topics sports media viewers felt were political in nature, all participants were asked to rate a list of topics on a scale of “1 – not political at all” to “7 – very political.” Results determined that topics directly involving politics (e.g., athletes running for office, athlete protest policies, coverage of a politician’s fandom, etc.) were viewed as highly political content. Participants also evaluated transgender rights as one of the most political topics currently in sports, a topic that has received much attention in various state legislatures during the past year.¹ Notably, participants rated transgender rights and the politics of gender, as a whole, very differently, with gender being rated as more politically neutral. Furthermore, participants rated the Olympic Games as more political in nature than other international sporting competitions, including the World Cup. It is worth noting that this data was collected while ongoing discussions of diplomatic boycotts of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in China were occurring.²

Do You Believe the Following Topics Are “Political” In Nature?

(1 = Not Political at All; 7 = Very Political)



When examining the data by party identification, results reveal key insights pertaining to differences in perceptions of the playing of the national anthem and displays of military appreciation and support. Democrats (n = 5,126) rated the playing of the national anthem to be much more political in nature than Republicans (n = 3,472), and Democrats also rated displays of military appreciation and support (n = 5,189) to be much more political than Republicans (n = 4,025).

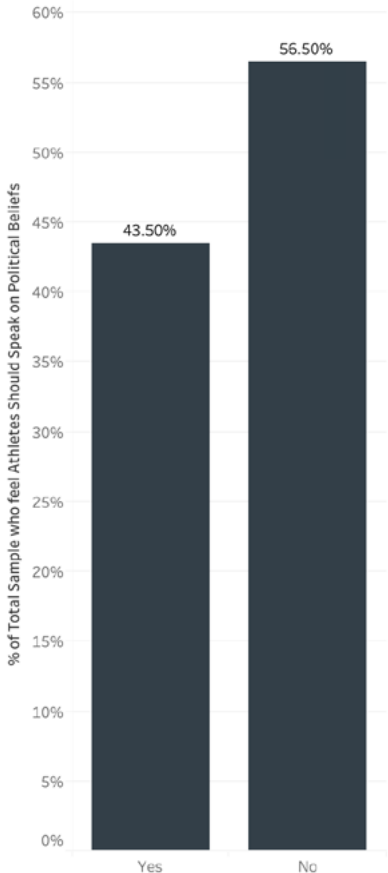
1 <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-12-01/these-states-restrict-how-transgender-students-participate-in-school-sports>

2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/08/world/europe/uk-china-olympics-diplomatic-boycott.html>

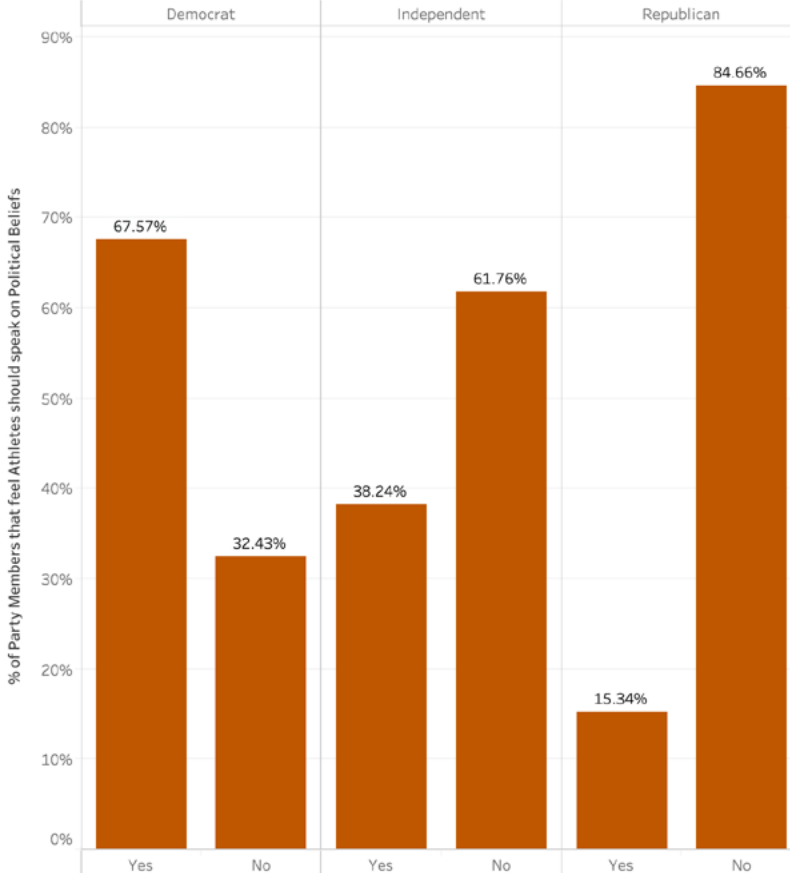
ATHLETES AND SHARING OF POLITICAL BELIEFS

All participants were asked a binary yes/no question: “Do you think athletes should share their political beliefs publicly on sports media platforms?” Overall, a majority of the sample (n = 56.5%) replied that athletes should *not* share their political beliefs on sports media platforms. When examined by party identification, results reveal a clear distinction in the opinions of Republicans and Democrats on this issue. A resounding 84.66% of Republicans do not support athletes sharing their political beliefs, while 67.57% of Democrats do support athletes sharing their beliefs. A majority of those who identify as Independents (n = 61.76%) also do not support athletes sharing their political beliefs publicly.

**Athletes Sharing Political Beliefs
(Total Sample)**

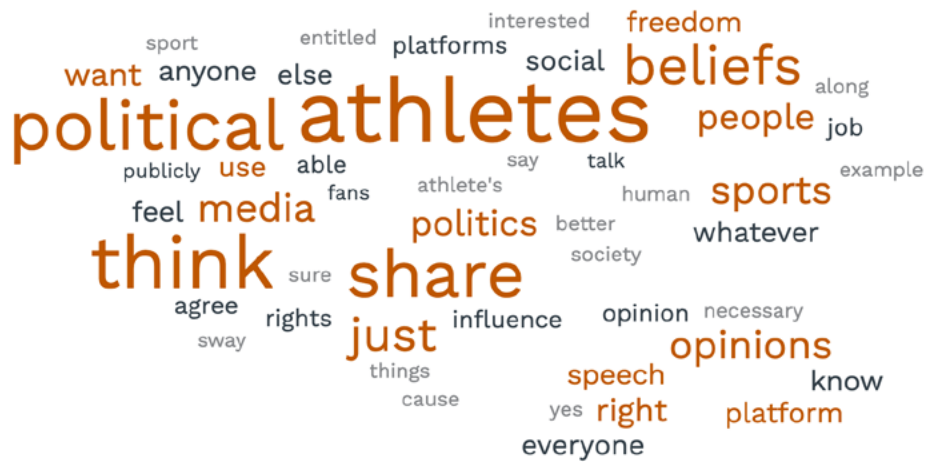


**Athletes Sharing Political Beliefs
(Party Identification)**



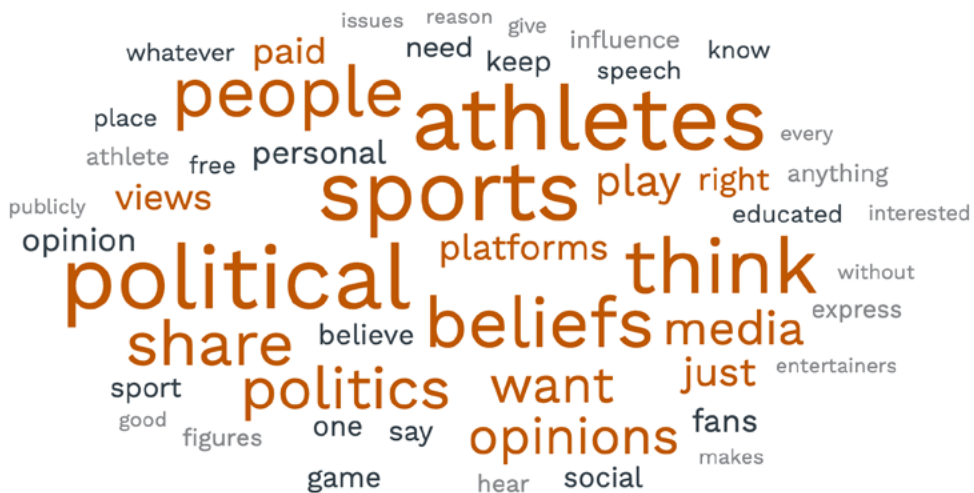
Participants were also asked why they did or did not feel athletes should share their beliefs publicly on sports media platforms. Their open-ended responses were used to generate two word clouds by party identification. The word cloud generated from Democrats' responses featured keywords such as "freedom," "beliefs," "interested," and "human," which highlights the fact that they were, generally, more supportive of athletes using their public platform to share their thoughts on political subjects that interested them. As one Democratic participant stated, "Athletes often have a far-reaching platform and can do a lot of good by stating their opinions. Their willingness to speak up can encourage others to do the same, creating an active electorate."

Democrats' Responses



The word cloud generated from Republicans' responses featured keywords, such as "entertainers," "play," "game," and "paid," which highlights the fact that they generally preferred that athletes separate their personal beliefs from the playing of the sport, preferring that political beliefs and sports remain separate. One Republican participant stated, "Absolutely not. Sporting events are an enjoyable distraction from all of the negativity which includes politics. Give the fans a break."

Republicans' Responses



INTRODUCING SURVEY 2: AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF LEADING SPORTS MEDIA BRANDS

Natalie Brown-Devlin

Leading sports media brands navigated many compelling storylines in 2021—the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), [protests for racial justice](#), [the rescheduled 2020 Olympics in Tokyo](#), [discussions around mental health](#), and [new athlete regulations pertaining to name, image, and likeness](#). In response to media brands' coverage of these important issues and their impact on sports, audience members have scrutinized coverage.

[Scholarly examination](#) of audience exposure to political content in sports media have determined that sports media audiences report a “low-but-substantial” level of incidental exposure to political content while viewing sports media. [Recent data](#) suggest Americans desire exposure to sports content over political content, with six of the top ten news stories in October 2021 being sports-related. This marks a departure from the top ten news stories in October 2020, in which only two were sports-related.

Perhaps there is no sports media entity that better illustrates this sports and politics debate than ESPN, the self-proclaimed “Worldwide leader in sports.” In 2017, financial issues prompted ESPN to lay off many well-known sports journalists; yet, [many surmised](#) that ESPN's financial struggles were due to their coverage of political issues. A popular media narrative asserted that ESPN was [too political](#) or [maintained a liberal bias](#). The political debate around ESPN's coverage escalated in 2017 when then-ESPN SportsCenter host Jemele Hill called then-President Donald Trump a [“white supremacist.”](#) President Trump [countered on Twitter](#) stating, “ESPN is paying a really big price for its politics (and bad programming). People are dumping it in RECORD numbers. Apologize for untruth!” In response to the “too political” narrative, ESPN conducted a survey of its viewers, [finding that 64% of respondents](#) felt that ESPN provides proper coverage on the mix of sports and political issues.

In 2018, [Disney CEO Bob Iger stated](#) he felt ESPN's coverage “swung a little bit too far away from the field” in favor of politics. ESPN hired a new president, Jimmy Pitaro, who wanted the network to maintain a [politically neutral style](#) of reporting. Yet, [the “stick to sports” approach was impossible](#) to maintain in 2020, when racial tensions following the murder of George Floyd led to worldwide protests, many of which involved collegiate and professional athletes. These stark changes in the network's approach to coverage of top stories suggests that additional study is needed to provide an updated measure of viewers' perceptions of ESPN's coverage



Shealah Craighead/Wikimedia Commons

President Donald Trump participates in the coin toss of the 2020 Army-Navy college football game.

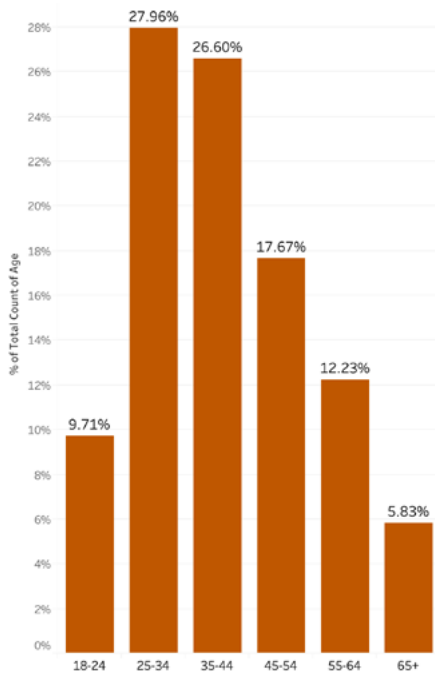
of politics and sports news. Furthermore, while ESPN's brand has seemingly been at the forefront of the debate surrounding the mix of sports and politics, other leading sports brands have not yet received the same type of scholarly examination.

Therefore, this study surveyed 516 self-identified sports fans, using Prolific panels in December 2021. The bar charts on the following pages present the results from the survey that measured respondents' perceptions of the following sports media brands: ESPN, NBC Sports, CBS Sports, FOX Sports, Yahoo! Sports, and Bleacher Report. Notably, respondents rated ESPN highest in terms of Credibility, Accuracy, and Trustworthiness (see page 11). While most networks were rated fairly neutrally in terms of perceived bias, FOX Sports was rated the highest in terms of bias (see page 12). Also, FOX Sports was rated as the most “Conservative” sports media brand and NBC Sports was rated as the most “Liberal” sports media brand (see page 12). These results suggest that respondents' perceptions of these sports media networks might be influenced by their news-brand counterparts, FOX News and MSNBC. Each chart also presents results broken down by respondents' proclaimed party affiliation and provides the average of the entire sample. Respondents also provided feedback pertaining to their perceptions of the “mixing of sports and politics.” Again, results show a polarized viewership, when analyzed according to respondents' party identification. Overall, respondents who identified as “Democrat” were much more favorable toward the mixing of sports and politics than those who identified as “Republican” (see page 13). ■

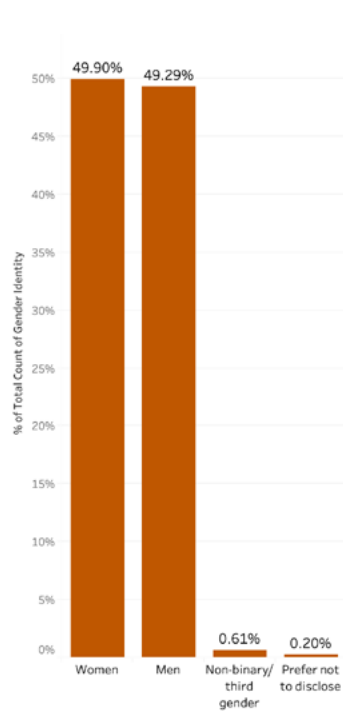
SURVEY 2: DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

In order to measure sports fans' perceptions of sports media leaders, researchers surveyed 516 participants from the United States who self-identified as sports fans, using the Prolific panel service in December 2021. Participants reported consuming sports-related content for approximately 11.51 hours a week, and reported consuming live sports content for approximately 8.86 hours per week. The charts below highlight the demographics of the sample.

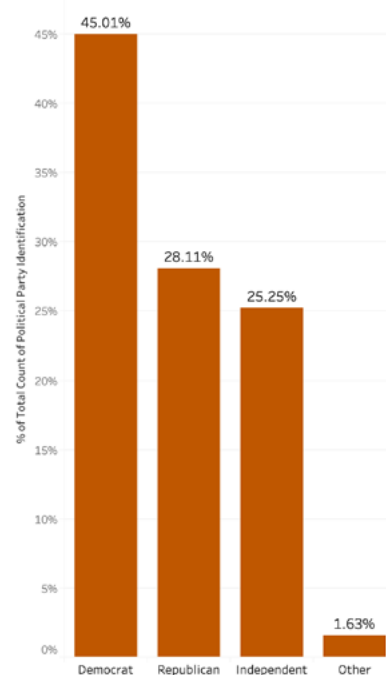
Survey 2 Age Range



Gender Identity



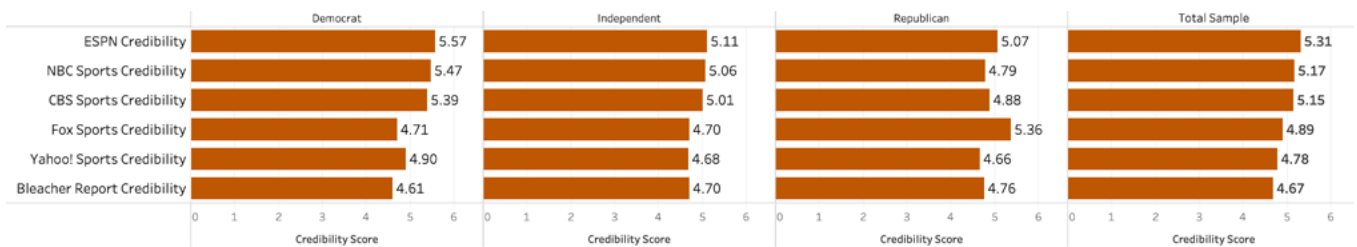
Political Identity



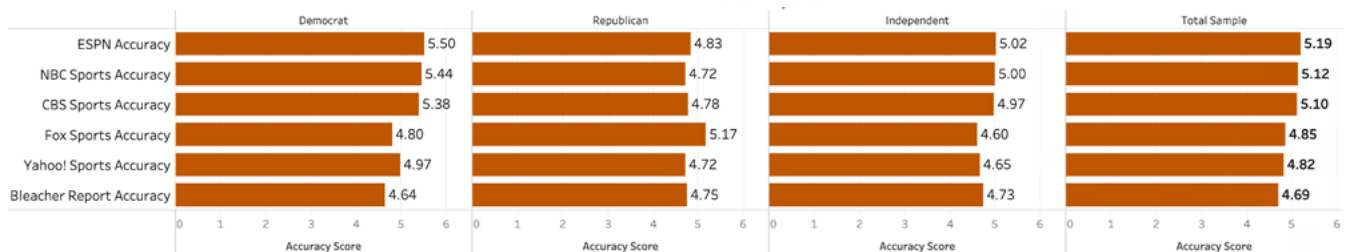
VIEWERS' EVALUATIONS OF SPORTS MEDIA

Participants were asked to evaluate leading sports media brands (ESPN, Fox Sports, Bleacher Report, CBS Sports, NBC Sports, and Yahoo! Sports) in terms of their perceived credibility, accuracy, and trustworthiness. Overall, participants rated ESPN the highest in terms of credibility (n = 5.31), accuracy (n = 5.19), and trustworthiness (n = 4.98). When examining the evaluations by political party, Republicans tended to be more favorable of Fox Sports, ranking it highest in terms of credibility (n = 5.36), accuracy (n = 5.17), and trustworthiness (n = 4.93). Democrats and Independents ranked ESPN highest in all three areas.

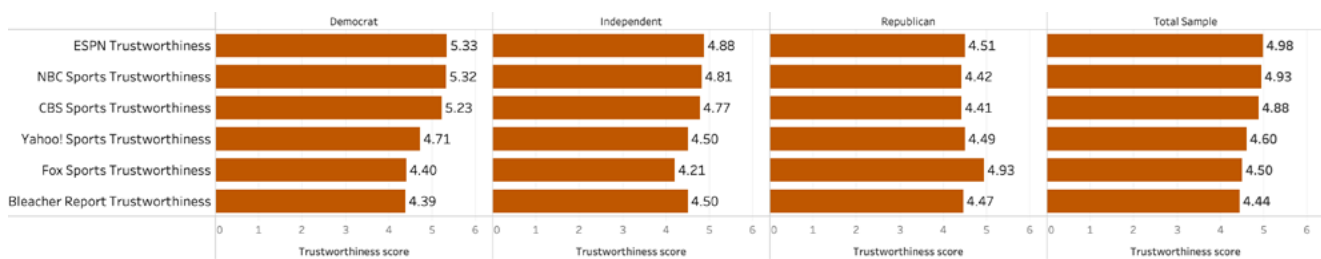
Sports Media Credibility – Political Party



Sports Media Accuracy – Political Party



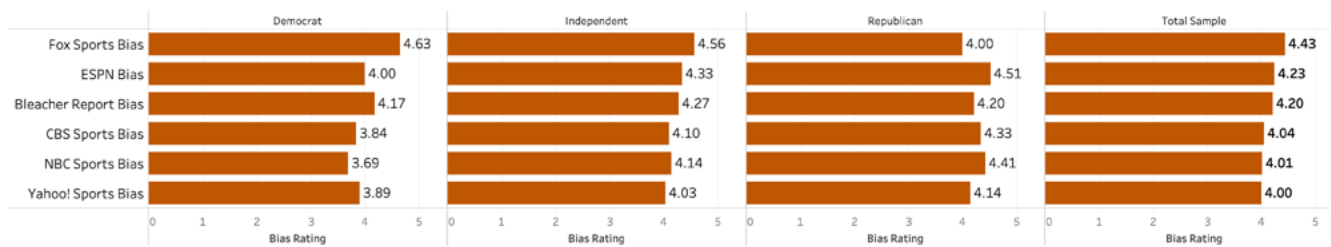
Sports Media Trustworthiness – Political Party



VIEWER EVALUATIONS OF SPORTS MEDIA POLITICAL CONTENT

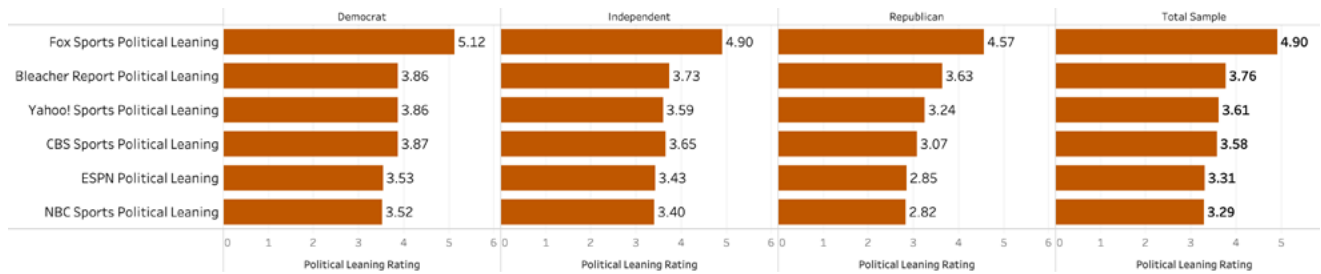
Participants also rated leading sports media brands (ESPN, Fox Sports, Bleacher Report, CBS Sports, NBC Sports, and Yahoo! Sports) in terms of their perception of politically biased content, political leanings, and the frequency with which they feature political content. Participants were asked to evaluate whether each sports media brand was *biased* in their reporting (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Overall, participants scored each media network rather neutrally, with most media networks hovering around the scale's neutral midpoint. When examining perceptions of bias according to participants' party identification, Democrats rated Fox Sports as the most biased (n = 4.63) and Republicans rated ESPN as the most biased (n = 4.51).

Sports Media Bias – Political Party



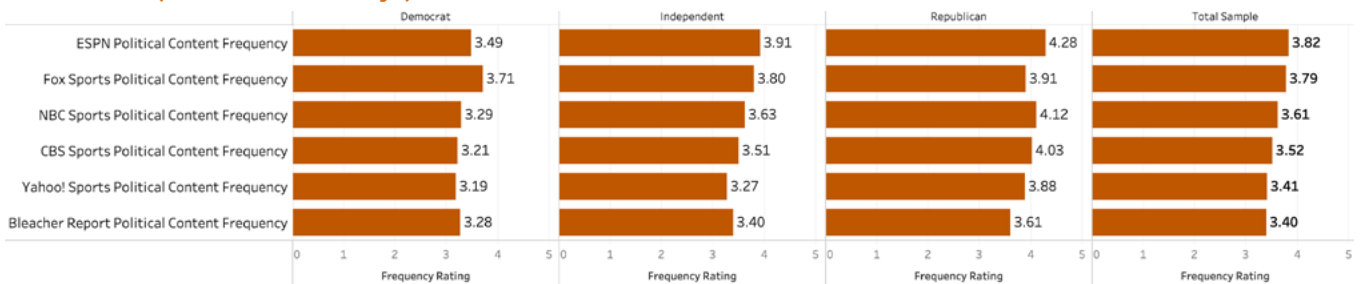
Participants also rated each sport media brand in terms of their perception of the brands' political leaning, with 1 = Very Liberal and 7 = Very Conservative. Overall, Fox Sports was rated as the most Conservative-leaning brand (4.91) and NBC Sports was rated as the most Liberal-leaning brand (n = 3.29).

Political Leaning – Political Party (1 = Very Liberal; 7 = Very Conservative)



Participants also rated each sport media brand in terms of their perception of the frequency with which they feature political content. Overall, participants, again, scored each media brand rather neutrally, with most media brands being rated around the scale's neutral midpoint.

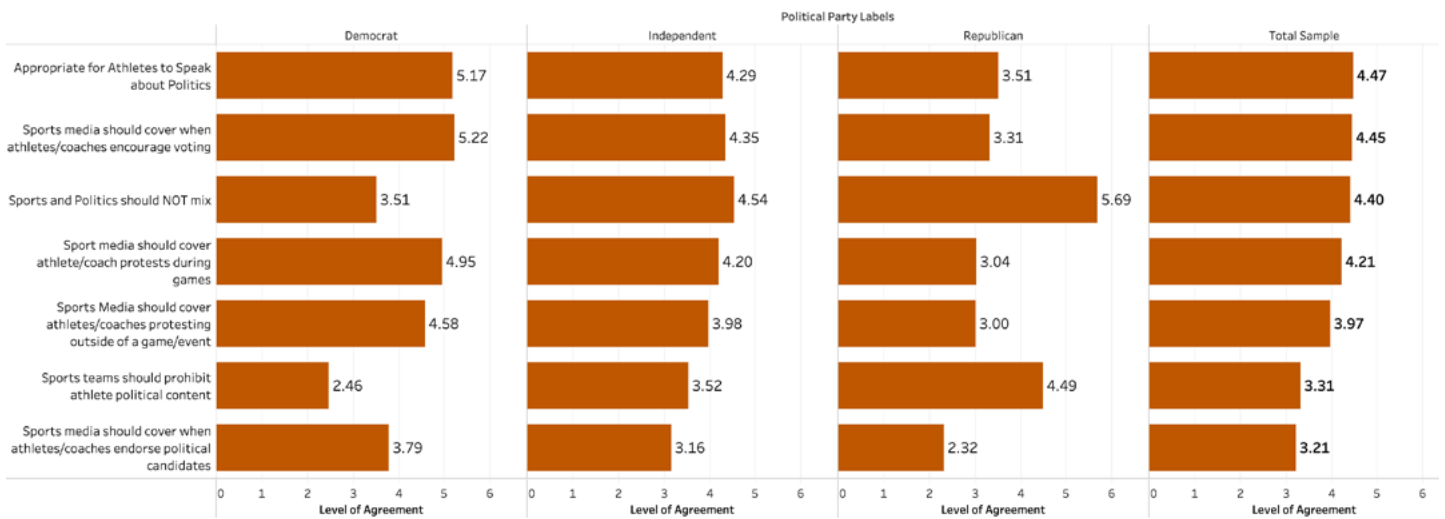
Viewer Perception of Frequency of Political Content (1 = Never; 7 = Always)



SHOULD POLITICS AND SPORTS MIX?

Participants rated their level of agreement with a series of statements intended to evaluate their perceptions of the intersection of sports media and politics, with 1 = Strongly disagree and 7 = Strongly agree. Results showed that, overall, Republicans were strongly in favor of sports and politics *not* mixing (n = 5,688), compared to Democrats (n = 3,511). Republicans also rated the idea of sports teams prohibiting athletes from engaging with political content (n = 4,493) more highly than Democrats (n = 2,462). Democrats (n = 5,172) rated the idea of athletes speaking about politics more highly than Republicans (n = 3,507). Republicans were not supportive of sports media covering athlete/coach protests, whether the protest occurred during a game (n = 3,036) or outside of a game/event (n = 3,000). All participants, regardless of political party identification, seemed generally unsupportive of sports media covering athletes or coaches engaging in the overt, political act of endorsing a particular political candidate.

Sport Fan Perspective of Mix of Sports Media & Politics (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree)



CRITICAL CASE STUDIES



INTRODUCING THE CRITICAL CASE STUDIES

Jennifer McClearen

2021 witnessed political power struggles within American culture that took shape in particular ways in sports media contexts. To consider how historical, economic, and cultural factors intertwine to inform sports media and politics this past year, we have curated a series of critical case studies to provide depth and nuance to some of our findings in the other sections of this report.

We use the term *critical* in its academic sense. The [critical tradition](#) examines how political, economic, and social power operate within cultural spaces such as sports media. As [Kent Ono](#) explains, a critical perspective questions the “broad set of beliefs, forces, and attitudes that become ingrained within a society that make people, for example, immediately rise and put hand over heart before the national anthem is played, unquestioningly use gender-segregated bathrooms, or accept a link between biological identity markers and intelligence.” In other words, scholars use this approach to investigate how political forces compel us to think, act, and believe in particular ways while carefully examining the consequences of those thoughts, actions, and beliefs in society.

This collection of case studies contemplates how political forces shape league structures, media conventions, historical events, and gendered and racial hierarchies. Each case considers specific leagues or athletes contextually but also signal how these cases have broader connections to American society writ large.

The first case study, “The 20th Anniversary of 9/11 and Sport’s Reliance on Unity” by Nathaniel Repay and Michael L. Butterworth, questions the fundamental American assumption that sports provide a space of “unity and shared purpose.” Repay and Butterworth posit that the commemoration of 9/11 represents a trend in sports and other American contexts of perpetually seeking “unity” even though that unity doesn’t include all Americans. While unity may seem like a worthy aspiration, Repay and Butterworth argue that we must first attend to how economic stratification, racism, sexism, and other oppressive structures divide us.



UCInternational/Wikimedia Commons

The World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers visit with President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris at the White House.

The next case study examines other fundamentally American beliefs exemplified in sports. In “Kyrie Irving, Athlete Voice, and Vaccine Hesitancy,” Olivia S. Gellar and Michael L. Butterworth illustrate the tension between NBA basketball player Kyrie Irving’s willingness to view racial justice as a common good but his insisting that the pandemic is an issue of his personal health rather than public health. Gellar and Butterworth argue that rugged individualism guides Irving’s and others’ expressions of vaccine hesitancy.

The next case study scrutinizes how “paternalism” operates in college sports. In “NIL Is Just the Beginning,” Katie Lever considers the recent move by the NCAA to allow college athletes to profit on their names, images, and likenesses (NIL). Lever argues that although NIL rights are a step in a positive direction for increasing the agency of collegiate athletes, the NCAA’s default paternalistic treatment of young adult athletes remains consistent. She contends that college athletes should be treated as legal adults with the right to organize as laborers and negotiate their working conditions.

The next three case studies focus on issues and athletes that have received less coverage in 2021 (or in previous years) in sports media: transgender athletes, women's sports, and Black women athletes. These case studies center the fact that political power is wielded in sports media to privilege some identities and to marginalize others.

Vincent Peña and Jamie Jelinek demonstrate that major sports outlets such as ESPN and Yahoo! Sports have largely ignored legislative efforts to bar trans girls and women from participating in sports that affirm their gender identity in "Coverage of Anti-Transgender Athlete Legislation in Mainstream Sports Media." When these sports outlets do cover this issue, Peña and Jelinek argue that they focus on the effects of such legislation on political careers—a focus that fails to recognize the impact of increasing transphobia in America and further marginalizes trans athletes.

In "Breaking the Spectacle: Exploitation and Empowerment in the NWSL," Jessica Luther and Kathryn Hartzell also analyze the impacts of marginalization in women's sports. Luther and Hartzell demonstrate that a fear of bursting the mirage that professional women's soccer is an empowering space for women and girls led to a willingness to ignore how coaches harassed and abused players in the league. Now that

the illusion of empowerment has been shattered, NWSL players are advocating for policies and protections to make their working environment safer moving forward.



This collection of case studies contemplates how political forces shape league structures, media conventions, historical events, and gendered and racial hierarchies. Each case considers specific leagues or athletes contextually but also signal how these cases have broader connections to American society writ large."

While most of these case studies identify how dominant ideologies and beliefs support inequalities in sports media, the last contribution probes how marginalized identities resist media conventions that disenfranchise them. Lily Kunda and Amira Rose Davis examine how athletes assert agency in "Black Women Athletes Take Control of Their Own Narratives." Kunda and Davis discuss how professional tennis star Naomi Osaka and decorated Olympic gymnast Simone Biles use social media, digital platforms, and other streaming media to tell their own stories. While mainstream sports journalism has historically failed to represent Black women as

fully human, Osaka and Biles "get to tell textured stories that do not have to be reduced or simplified."

Each case study uses events in 2021 to examine the power struggles in American politics that circulate within sports media. While the specificities of each case are unique to this year, each one sheds light on longstanding beliefs, values, and ideologies that will continue to shape American society. ■



Ken Ruinard-USA TODAY Sports/Wikimedia Commons

Sports have become a visible site for social justice advocacy.



Gary Granger Jr./Wikimedia Commons

THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11 AND SPORTS' RELIANCE ON "UNITY"

Patriotic pageantry in Jacksonville on the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

Nathaniel Repay and Michael L. Butterworth

Sports have arguably provided the [most visible rituals of remembrance](#) in the years after the 9/11 attacks. Beginning with somber ceremonies of mourning in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and quickly turning to celebrations of military strength and national resolve, U.S. sports leagues and organizations have incorporated Air Force flyovers, "support the troops" efforts, "USA!" chants, emotional performances of "God Bless America," and other rituals into their daily routines. Despite the ubiquity of these events, there remain particular moments of emphasis. In 2021, one such moment was the 20th anniversary 9/11.

Many of the sports commemorations of September 11, 2021 were poignant, and they also continued to feature exaggerated performances of nationalism that warrant critical attention. [Scholars of public memory argue that memory](#) texts are often less about the past and more about managing the anxieties of the present. With this idea in mind, we can recognize that much of the post-9/11 memorializing in sport has been designed to help calm a nation shaken by tragedy and uncertain about the "war on terror."

Part of sports' appeal in moments of remembrance lies in its presumed ability to transcend differences and foster unity,

features that took on added significance in the context of heightened anxieties in 2021. Over the course of the year, the United States experienced an insurrection at the nation's capitol, a series of catastrophic climate events, a resurgence of Black Lives Matter activism, and an unprecedented public health crisis. All of this corresponded with the Donald Trump presidency, a disintegrating public sphere, and growing distrust of news and information. In short, there are good reasons why Americans might seek some affirmation of unity and shared and purpose.

Our focus is on [a video produced by the National Football League](#) (NFL), which aired before kickoff of all games on Sunday, September 12. It is a beautifully produced recollection not only of what happened on 9/11 itself but what presumably took place beginning the next day, on 9/12. Narrated by actor Steve Buscemi (a former fire fighter who, on 9/11, [returned to his old fire house](#) to help in rescue efforts) and featuring players and 9/11 survivors, the video shares "the story of 9/12." This narrative is bolstered by the painful images from the tragedy and a gentle, guitar-picked version of "Amazing Grace," suggesting that if, during 9/11 we were lost, in its aftermath we were found.



In these words and images, there is no inequality, no discrimination, no hate. It is certainly an appealing and romantic message. It is also an illusion.”



Jntman5621/ Wikimedia Commons

A New York Giants fan reflects on the 15th anniversary of 9/11.

An emphasis on “unity” confirms this message. Former New England Patriots player Joe Andruzzi said, “Everybody in this country came together, no matter who you were, what nationality, what color you were. You came together as one.” Sean Egan, whose father was killed in the 9/11 rescue effort, declared, “This idea of, of unity, was something really special.” And Buscemi’s narration boasts, “After [9/11], we picked each other up. We did it by having faith and belief in one another and in something bigger than ourselves. We did it together.”

These sentiments are complemented by photos portraying a diverse array of Americans supporting one another and declaring their love for their country. In these words and images, there is no inequality, no discrimination, no hate. It is certainly an appealing and romantic message. It is also an illusion.

As much as we might wish to believe that “everyone” supported and cared for each other after 9/11, we know better. [Leaders advocated for war](#). Americans of Islamic faith were [targets of hate crimes](#). Political liberties [were restricted](#). And [dissent was characterized as unpatriotic](#). In other words, although there were countless acts of courage and grace in the aftermath of 9/11, there are plenty of reminders that the unity we claim does not extend to all.

If there were Americans in 2001 who felt alienated or marginalized, this was the case even more so in 2021. For those affected by the pandemic, economic stratification, racism, sexism, gun violence, climate change, or the many

other issues facing the nation, claims to “unity” might well be met with skepticism. Yet, especially in recent years, [sports leagues like the NFL have emphasized this symbolic theme](#) and, consequently, dismissed the legitimate reasons why some Americans feel disconnected and divided. The “9/12” video does this most obviously in its visual associations between 9/11 and the crises of today. In both the opening and closing narrations, viewers see contemporary images of protest and health care workers. The lesson is summarized by Buscemi:

“It’s 9/12 again. Today our country faces problems new and old and seems as divided as we’ve ever been. As a nation at our lowest points, we as a people find a way to rise the highest. As we remember and honor the memory of 9/11, let’s also never forget the lessons and spirit of 9/12. There is no problem we can’t solve, no obstacle we can’t overcome, no mountain we can’t climb . . . together.”

Buscemi’s concluding words are juxtaposed with iconic images representing America’s challenges and triumphs, all suggesting any hardship is merely an obstacle on the way to the inevitable greatness of the nation. This is a comforting, romantic version of American identity, but it is ultimately damaging if we hold up such symbols without confronting the very real forms of inequality and injustice that persist in the United States. Thus, “unity” cannot be our goal unless and until we first contend with our divisions. ■

KYRIE IRVING, ATHLETE VOICE, AND VACCINE HESITANCY

Olivia S. Gellar and Michael L. Butterworth

Kyrie Irving is no stranger to the spotlight. He played for one of college basketball's signature programs at Duke, was the first overall pick in the 2011 National Basketball Association (NBA) draft, won an NBA championship alongside LeBron James with the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2016, and now plays for what many consider to be the league's most talented team in Brooklyn. Beyond his obvious talents and accomplishments, Irving has earned attention for his refusal to conform and his at times controversial opinions. For example, his declaration in 2017 that the "earth is flat" prompted widespread criticism. He later apologized, acknowledging that the public outcry was an instructive lesson about the "[power of voice](#)." Then, over the course of 2020, when the emergent pandemic and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter activism converged in the NBA "bubble," Irving exercised the power of his voice in conversations about whether a league built on the labor of Black athletes should be playing games in the midst of a national reckoning with racism. As ESPN's [Adrian Wojnarowski reported](#), he "has forged a reputation as a disruptor within his career."

In 2021 Irving once again found himself at the center of controversy, this time about COVID-19 vaccine mandates. Celebrated so recently for his principled stands against racial injustice, he faced substantial criticism for refusing to abide by [New York's policy](#) prohibiting unvaccinated people over the age of 12 from entering "certain covered premises." Irving insisted that he wanted his decision to [remain "private," even as others around the league](#) and outside observers pleaded with him to comply with the mandate. In the ongoing controversy, Irving's individual right to make decisions about his own health was juxtaposed against the reality that the pandemic is a [matter of public health](#). The impasse reflects a long-standing tension in American culture between individualism and collectivism.

A notoriously "individualistic" society, the United States has celebrated a mythic "American Dream" that relies on upward mobility and personal freedom. Yet, as scholars such as [Walter Fisher](#) and [Robert Rowland and John Jones](#) have noted, the strength of the American Dream lies in the balance between individual prosperity and the collective good. [Robert](#)



Irving provided political capital for those who have used the vaccine as a litmus test in an ongoing culture war."

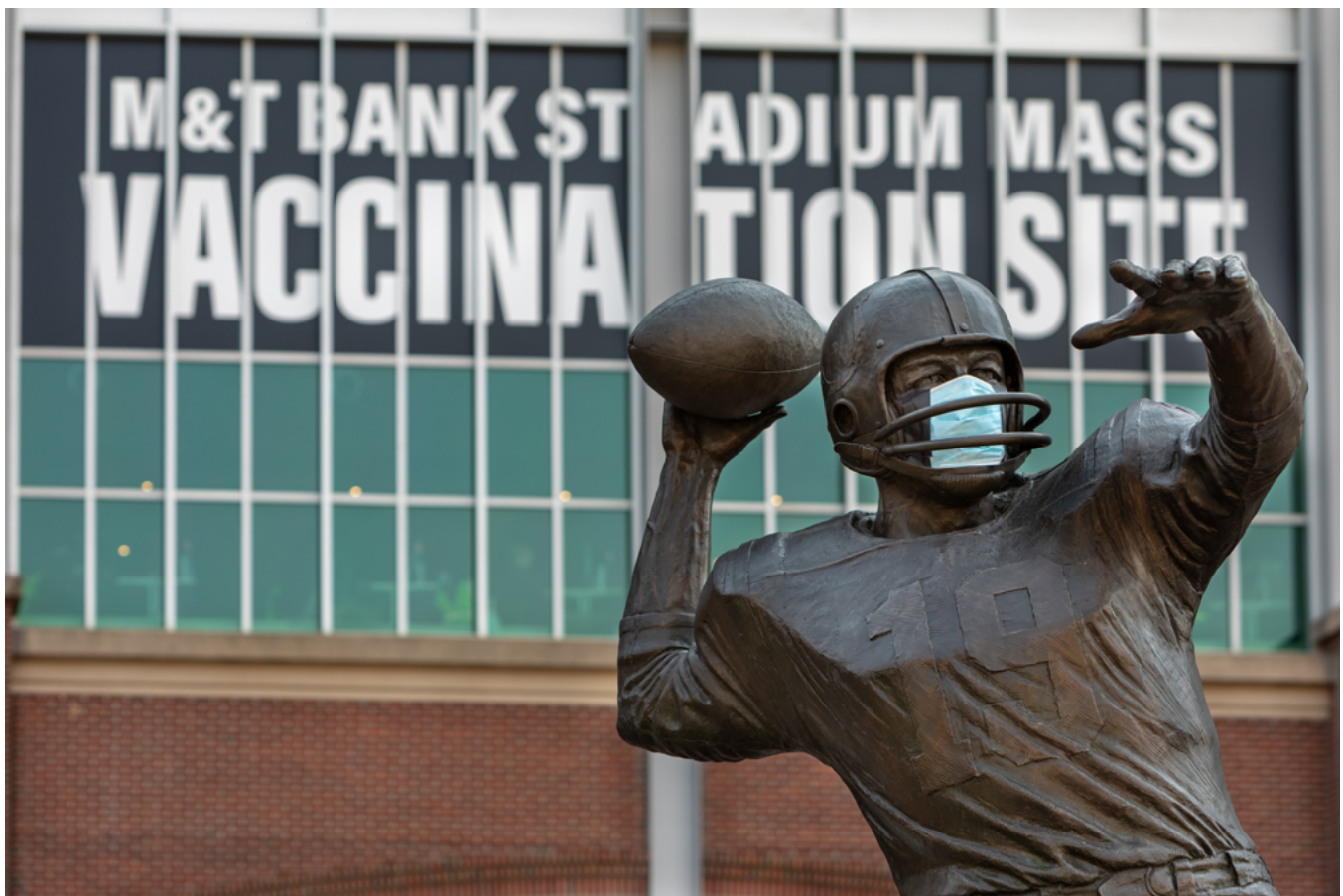


Leonard Zhukovsky/Shutterstock.com

NBA superstar Kyrie Irving (shown in 2016).

[Wuthnow adds](#), "there is a kind of *both-and* quality ... a balance between the autonomous individual who pursues individual happiness and the responsible individual who contributes to the common good." Irving's public comments about racial injustice have shown his capacity to see how discrimination and inequity are products of our mutual dependence on one another—i.e., allowing ourselves to believe that racism is merely an individual pathology rather than a social structure too often prevents us from seeing how disenfranchised and minoritized communities experience daily life. Irving's more recent turn reverses course, substituting collective well-being for his individual comfort ("privacy").

This retreat into radical individualism is perhaps the best explanation for the sudden embrace of Irving's resistance by [conservative pundits and elected officials](#) who had been



christianthiel.net/Shutterstock.com

Talk of the virus and vaccines has become inseparable from sports.

openly critical of “woke” athletes and their advocacy for Black Lives Matter. Senator Ted Cruz tweeted, “I stand with Kyrie,” along with the hashtag, “#MyBodyMyChoice.” Fox News commentator Will Cain applauded athletes who are “standing up for critical thinking and individuality and standing against popular thought.” And, conflating racial justice activism with anti-vaccine expression, Donald Trump, Jr. tweeted, “Kyrie just sacrificed more than [Colin] Kaepernick ever did!” These comments, along with many others, equate Irving’s stance with abstract notions of “freedom” and “liberty,” implicitly arguing that those concepts can only be attained by rejecting any notion of shared, public goods (“socialism”). The point isn’t that conservative political commentary on the matter is hypocritical because a once-denigrated activist athlete could suddenly be seen as a hero; rather, the point is that Irving provided political capital for those who have used the vaccine as a litmus test in an ongoing culture war. Regardless of how these conservatives feel about Irving himself, they appeared more than happy to use him as a vehicle to manufacture controversy and distrust.

[As others have noted](#), the emphasis on Irving’s vaccine refusal and his subsequent inability to play professional basketball

distracted from the fact that 95% of NBA players were vaccinated by the beginning of the 2021-22 season. Public health campaigns and vaccine mandates for other workers associated with the league were largely successful, with some superstars such as Jrue Holiday and Karl-Anthony Towns [leading advocacy efforts](#). There is little reason to conclude that Irving’s turn to radical individualism should cast doubt on the power of athletes’ voices. As [Professor Courtney Cox explains](#), what made the participation of players in Black Lives Matter activism so meaningful is that they spoke from direct experience and embodied knowledge. They had a kind of expertise that lent credibility and weight to their voices. Irving has made it clear that he lacks any similar kind of expertise regarding the coronavirus or vaccinations. From this point of view, we might see Irving’s resistance—or [Aaron Rodgers’, for that matter](#)—as expressions of rugged individualism, rooted in a heroic model of masculine toughness and independence. In short, Irving failed to grasp what [the players in the WNBA have](#), that, in the [words of Eugene Robinson](#), “there are occasions . . . when individual rights are outweighed by collective duty.” ■

NIL IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Katie Lever

July 1, 2021 marked what will perhaps be remembered as one of the most important days in the history of college sports—for the first time ever, college athletes were able to profit from their names, images, and likenesses (NILs) without violating NCAA rules. The stark policy change came after years of activism and proves what scholars have long argued: [sports and politics are inseparable](#).

College athletes wasted no time in taking advantage of their NILs this past summer—from [billboards in Times Square](#) to [supporting family businesses](#), they hit the ground running with NIL deals the day these restrictions were lifted, and these moves were widely celebrated. However, what the celebratory discourse ignores is the fact that, beneath the surface of sweeping reform, not much has changed—the legislators behind NIL laws have been reading from the NCAA’s playbook this whole time. Rather than empowering athletes to call the shots when it comes to their NIL rights, these laws, however well-intended, are implicitly paternalistic in that they are dictating what college athletes can and cannot do.

The concept of paternalism, where authority figures infantilize subordinates by controlling their conduct under the guise of protection, isn’t new—for example, it’s the principle that guided the steel mill industry in the 1950’s. [Judge Elbert H. Gary](#), former chairman of the Board of the United States Steel

Corporation was notorious for implementing paternalistic values into business in an effort to solidify the twelve-hour workday, insisting it was what the workers wanted, rather than paying steelworkers a higher wage for a more reasonable eight-hour day.

[Robin Bernstein](#) further discusses the consequences of paternalism and infantilization in her book, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, where she grapples with an important question: “How did childhood acquire so much active weight that the exhortation to ‘protect the children’ seems to add persuasive power to almost any argument?” For example, in 2009, Keith Bardwell, the justice of the peace in Louisiana’s Tangipahoa Parish refused to perform a marriage ceremony for an interracial couple out of his so-called concern for their future children. Bardwell’s defense was that their hypothetical children would “suffer” because he believed there would be “a problem with both groups accepting a child from such a marriage.” Bardwell later resigned, but held fast to his belief that he was acting altruistically. “I’m not a racist,” he said. “My main concern is for the children.”

However, Bernstein points out that Bardwell refused to perform the ceremony “to protect children *who did not exist*,” and further contends that in Bardwell’s mind, “imagined children deserve protection more than living adults



“March Madness” is the NCAA’s largest and most profitable media event.

deserve constitutional rights.” As the [Supreme Court wrestles with women’s reproductive rights](#) due in large part to similar protective discourse on behalf of unborn children, the stakes of this dynamic cannot be overstated. And similarly, in the modern-day NCAA, college athletes constitute both the imagined children and the living adults—they are conceptualized and treated as children while they are legally of age, which obligates them to all kinds of guardrails ranging from frivolous to downright insulting.

When it comes to NIL policies, paternalism is subtle, but consistent. For example, California’s [“Fair Pay to Play Act”](#) requires athletes to sign with agents that are licensed in the state. [Florida’s NIL law](#) prohibits athletes from signing with brands that conflict with their team’s contract.

It’s happening at the university level, too—[BYU’s NIL policy](#) prohibits athletes from signing with coffee companies and [many others](#) loosely prohibit deals with organizations that violate the university’s code of conduct. To top it off, the NCAA’s interim NIL policy states that adherence to such rules is necessary to “protect and enhance student-athlete well-being.”

This isn’t to say that NIL expansion isn’t both welcome and historic—it certainly is. But the principle behind NIL policies and laws is nonetheless infantilizing, and it doesn’t stop with NIL. There’s also the practice of [housing football teams at hotels for home games](#) to keep athletes out of trouble, assigning [“class trackers”](#) to ensure class attendance, and enforcing [team rules](#) that govern their conduct from appearance standards to relationship disclosure policies. These products of paternalism—guardrails, rules, and regulations—point to what is arguably its most insidious aspect: its ideological component, which [legitimizes and justifies normative behavior](#). In other words, the normalization of athletes as controllable renders them childlike and strips them of agency in matters both small and large. But this dynamic could soon change.



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Large crowds (like this one at Ohio Stadium) are part of the spectacle of college athletics.



In the modern-day NCAA, college athletes constitute both the imagined children and the living adults—they are conceptualized and treated as children while they are legally of age, which obligates them to all kinds of guardrails ranging from frivolous to downright insulting.”

On September 29, 2021, NLRB General Counsel, Jennifer Abruzzo [released a memo](#) stating that “certain players” at American educational institutions should be considered employees and that she considers the term “student-athlete” to be a mischaracterization and a violation of the NLRA. Although Abruzzo doesn’t speak for the entire Board, her memo will soon be put to the test. Upon learning that people who don’t work for an organization can still file a complaint against it, [College Basketball Players Association co-founder, Michael Hsu](#), decided to put the ball in Abruzzo’s court and challenge the NCAA.

NIL has been a much-needed development for college athletes, but the real battle lies in labor rights. If college athletes are one day treated like legal adults and gain the right to organize and negotiate, they’ll really be able to put on a show. ■

COVERAGE OF ANTI-TRANSGENDER ATHLETE LEGISLATION IN MAINSTREAM SPORTS MEDIA

Vincent Peña and Jamie Jelinek



Jamie Smed/Wikimedia Commons

Canadian soccer player Quinn became the first trans athlete to win an Olympic medal in 2021.

In October 2021, Texas banned transgender athletes from participating in high school sports, becoming the latest state to enact a law specifically aimed at barring transgender girls from athletic competition. This law came amid a recent wave of transgender-exclusion efforts at the high school and college levels across the United States, as nine states have passed bills and another 26 states have considered or proposed similar legislation. Though trans inclusion has been a hot-button issue around the country for several years, mainstream sports outlets have largely ignored the issue. An initial examination of two of the largest and most prominent sports outlets in the U.S.—ESPN.com and Yahoo Sports—reveals the “[symbolic annihilation](#)” of trans athletes. Symbolic annihilation describes how mass media representation often marginalizes or renders invisible certain groups of people. Only a handful of articles address these bills, signaling a reticence to engage in one of the more [important issues](#) in sports over the last several years. The few articles that do cover anti-trans legislation mostly present the issue as something that remains separate from professional sports.

Scholars have argued that journalists, when they cover transgender athletes, often rely on sexist and cis-sexist language, include many sources who espouse transphobic ideas and views, and use benevolent anti-trans rhetoric. In recent years, transgender individuals have seen a significant rise in [visibility](#), with [celebrities](#), [athletes](#), and others coming out as trans and an [increase](#) in transgender representation in film and television. However, that newfound visibility has resulted in increased efforts to [police and control the spaces](#) in which transgender folks are allowed to exist, including an intense interest in policing women’s sports.

[Advocates](#) for transgender inclusion argue kids should be able to compete according to their gender identity, and that depriving them of the opportunity can have damaging effects on their mental health and well-being. [Critics](#) of transgender inclusion in sports argue there are inherent biological differences between the sexes, and that transgender women and girls have physical advantages that make their participation in sports unfair. Trans exclusion is often presented under the guise of gender equality for women, a tactic that flies in the face of the reality for women in sports. Athletic organizations and sports media have a poor record of promoting equality for women’s sports at the high school, college, and professional levels.

Reports from ESPN and Yahoo! Sports primarily present anti-trans athlete legislation within the context of state politics, which fails to address fully the social impact of these harmful efforts. In his [report](#) of Texas’s bill, Yahoo! Sports writer Jason Owens frames the issue as just one of many controversial bills to be signed by Gov. Greg Abbott. Citing recent restrictions on abortion and COVID-19 mandates in Texas, the article focuses more on Abbott’s political reputation than about the experience of transgender women and girls. Similarly, an ESPN [article](#) on exclusionary efforts in Kansas focuses on Governor Laura Kelly’s political career. While it does address the implications of the conservative legislation, the concern for transgender athletes is overshadowed by the explanation that “the ban is likely to be an issue in the 2022 Governor’s race.” Another ESPN [report](#)



These reports overwhelmingly place the rights of transgender athletes into the frame of political debate, emphasizing a problematic cultural belief that trans bodies are up for debate.”

Advocates for trans athletes push back against recent legislative proposals.



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outlines the guidelines and laws that govern transgender participation in sport in each state, including the names of the governors that have signed exclusionary bills. These reports overwhelmingly place the rights of transgender athletes into the frame of political debate, emphasizing a problematic cultural belief that trans bodies are up for debate.

The myopic focus on the legislative barriers faced by transgender athletes results in a limited view of the broader cultural problem. Conservative states such as Texas, Tennessee, and Kansas monopolize headlines because these new laws are a part of a coordinated effort by conservative lawmakers across the country to ban trans athletes from playing sports. Conversely, more moderate and left-leaning states remain largely outside the scope of critique. As a result, the few bills that have been proposed in more politically liberal states have not been passed into law. However, by only reporting on the issue from one angle, audiences can view sport's transphobic culture as a problem exclusive to conservative areas.

The increased coverage of the issues faced by transgender athletes, although important, remains narrow, especially regarding the fight for inclusion of transgender women in

professional sports. Transgender men like triathlete Chris Mosier have been featured in mainstream sports media—such as appearing in ESPN's [Body Issue](#)—while coverage of transgender women has remained limited to frames focusing on politicians, particularly as it relates to transgender inclusion. Another limitation of mainstream coverage is that it downplays the position of professional sports organizations on the issue. Aside from the work of ESPN's Katie Barnes, including their [coverage](#) of policy changes within the Premier Hockey Federation, the policies of America's most popular sports leagues aren't discussed. As a result, the fight for inclusion is positioned as an issue separate from mainstream sports culture.

The coverage ESPN and Yahoo! Sports give to issues of trans exclusion is important, and in some ways an improvement on previous coverage. However, by centering the political debate around transgender inclusion, these sports outlets frame the issues faced by transgender athletes as undeserving of adequate attention. Transgender athletes deserve the same rights, privileges, and opportunities afforded to cisgender athletes, and it's important that mainstream sports media outlets not further their marginalization by ignoring the widespread efforts to bar them from competition. ■

BREAKING THE SPECTACLE: EXPLOITATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE NWSL

Jessica Luther and Kathryn Hartzell

The professional women's soccer league in the United States faced a reckoning in 2021. Over a two month period, investigative journalists exposed the abuses of two head coaches in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), [Paul Riley](#) and [Richie Burke](#), and in doing so, illuminated the larger institutional apparatus that protects abusive men at the expense of [women athletes, coaching staff, and club employees](#). These revelations shattered the popular perception of women's soccer as a progressive and empowering sport. Alongside the pandemic disruption, wider changes in labor relations for athletes, and shifting attitudes toward women's sports, these stories have forced a reexamination of the power dynamics around women athletes.

Women's sports have long been held up by the media, fans, and even women's sports organizations themselves as necessary because they inspire and empower young girls. At the same time, women's sports are chronically [underfunded, under-resourced, and sparsely covered in the media](#). [Rachel Allison](#) and [Jennifer McClearn](#) argue that these contradictions lead to exploitative labor practices where women are expected to devalue their own labor in order to ensure the larger goal of promoting women's sports which are often treated as in danger of disappearing. This combination of factors means that people who care about and participate in women's sports are often hesitant to expose the underbelly because it could damage these ideas of inspiration and empowerment and weaken what little support already exists.

In recent years, women's soccer in the U.S. has become a spectacle of equality and empowerment. Media outlets positioned the 2019 World Cup Champion [USWNT](#) as brave symbols of a progressive future. [Megan Rapinoe's public war of words with President Trump](#) represented to many fans the



This combination of factors means that people who care about and participate in women's sports are often hesitant to expose the underbelly because it could damage these ideas of inspiration and empowerment and weaken what little support already exists."



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Paul Riley, former NWSL head coach fired for sexual misconduct.

new power of women's sports and a repudiation of sexist and homophobic attitudes. [The team sued US Soccer](#), demanding a more equal pay structure and became a symbol of gender equity. This fervor around the USWNT inevitably spilled over onto the NWSL, even though the league has an identity beyond the USWNT.

Richie Burke's sexist and racist abuse of Washington Spirit players and Paul Riley's manipulation of young players into sleeping with him, especially during his time with the Portland Thorns, though, was the underbelly on full display. The subsequent revelations that [two other NWSL clubs had quietly terminated their head coaches](#) for harassment in the last year, and the further exposure of [Chicago Red Stars' Rory Dames abusive practices](#), demonstrated the league's commitment to protecting known abusers. The differential treatment of [NWSL players who on average subsist on \\$30,000 a year or less](#) without the ability to control their image rights, and repeated retention and rehiring of men with public histories of inappropriate behavior, laid bare

The USWNT in 2019, including stars Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan.



the realities of working in a field where men continue to dominate ownership and leadership roles. The goals of club owners, many of whom represent hedge funds and other investment-related firms, and the players who create the product, allowed for [toxic cultures](#) to thrive and encouraged players to remain silent.

[For Sonal Jha](#), sport as spectacle reduces sport to an object of viewer pleasure that erases the labor of athletes. In that sense, the spectacle of women's soccer started to splinter even before stories of abuse rocked the league. The global pandemic forced leagues and the press to contend with issues of player health and wellness that extended beyond the playing field to where players lived, where they trained, where they socialized. It reminded everyone that players, first and foremost, are people and they are laborers. For example, when the NWSL became the first U.S. professional sports league to return to play after the initial rise of COVID cases, press coverage for the event, the She Believes Cup, [centered on the creation of a safe "bubble,"](#) a holistic and enclosed environment that included not only games but training and living facilities. While the bubble existed ostensibly to protect players, lurking within it were other dangers. After the tournament, one NWSL team [quietly fired](#) an assistant coach for inappropriate sexual comments to players while another [fired a head coach](#) for similar reasons.

While the NWSL leadership did not link player health and wellbeing with harassment, the Players Association did. The [NWSLPA](#), which was officially recognized as a union in 2018, lobbied the league to adopt an anti-harassment policy, which it did in early 2021. It was under this [Anti-Harassment Policy for a Safe Work Environment](#) that clubs dismissed four head coaches in the summer and fall of 2021.

The NWSLPA is the latest players association to challenge power dynamics in professional women's sports through unionization and collective bargaining. Following the successful lead of the WNBA, [whose latest CBA](#) was announced in early 2020, the [NWSLPA hopes to secure its first CBA](#) to redress issues such as salary structures, image rights, and health insurance. The NWSLPA's attempt to challenge this structure aligns professional women soccer players not only with the WNBA but also with the [AFL-CIO](#).

In the wake of the reporting about Burke and Riley, [NWSL players protested on the field](#) during matches and vocalized their displeasure with the harmful choices made by league leadership. There is now a new commissioner, a push for a CBA, and players more willing to speak out than ever before. The spectacle of inspiration and empowerment has been shattered but the NWSL now has a chance to build a better, safer league for its players. ■

BLACK WOMEN ATHLETES TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR OWN NARRATIVES

Lily Kunda and Amira Rose Davis



Danilo Borges/Creative Commons

U.S. Olympic Gymnast Simone Biles (shown in 2016).

Black women athletes experienced increased visibility and intensified scrutiny in sports journalism in 2021. This coverage often centered not on their athletic performance but rather on their politics, their mental fortitude, and, of course, their bodies. Headlines highlighted the [continued activism](#) of WNBA players, exploited [#Blackgirlmagic](#) at the Olympics, and [scrutinized](#) the work ethic, patriotism, and mental toughness of many athletes across multiple sports. Yet, some Black women athletes challenged the ongoing coverage by taking control of their own narratives and using tools that often bypass traditional sports media outlets, which have demonstrated an inability to adequately cover athletes who are not straight white men.

Sports media remains [overwhelmingly white and male](#). Scholars and sports journalists, including [Akilah Francique Carter](#), [Cheryl Cooky](#), and [Howard Bryant](#), among others, have [discussed](#) how the lack of diversity in sports media impacts the ways racialized athletes, women athletes, and queer athletes are covered. Black women athletes, including Naomi Osaka and

Simone Biles, worked to produce their own narrative content, writing op-eds and drawing on partnerships with Netflix and Facebook to expand the possibilities of sports media and control how their stories were told.

When Naomi Osaka announced that she would not be participating in post-match press conferences at the French Open, she set off a conversation about the duty of an athlete, media, and access. After all four Grand Slam tournaments threatened escalating punishment, Osaka pulled out of the competition altogether, sparking a new wave of conversation around the mental health of athletes. After a few weeks, Osaka penned an article for [TIME](#), telling her own story in her own words. She followed that up a few months later with a three-part Netflix documentary that explored her anxiety, identity, decisions, and tennis career through her eyes.

Simone Biles is another Black female athlete who took charge of her narrative and compelled a conversation on mental and physical health. During the postponed 2020 Olympics, Biles



Black women athletes challenged the ongoing coverage by taking control of their own narratives and using tools that often bypass traditional sports media outlets, which have demonstrated an inability to adequately cover athletes who are not straight white men..”

was in the spotlight for deciding to withdraw from several Olympic events, [citing mental and physical well-being as the reason](#). The media coverage that erupted following her announcement questioned if she is a “quitter.”

Both historically and presently, the health and physical well-being of Black women in America [has not been a national priority](#). Racial biases contribute to the belief that Biles could have or should have been able to play through mental and physical pain.

[Research](#) shows that people—even medical professionals—hold the belief that Black women are physically stronger because they “feel less pain” than white people do. Like Osaka, Biles’s decision to withdraw for her own well-being is significant because it challenges stereotypes that say Black women are stronger and therefore more able to push through adversity.

Biles disrupted the narrative that Black women always must be strong and used the media tools at her disposal to do so. Biles used her Facebook documentary series [Simone Versus Herself](#) to reclaim her subjectivity as a Black woman. The series is shot in a video diary style, allowing viewers to hear from Biles directly about her feelings and experiences.

In the final episode, Biles reflects on Tokyo and the backlash she received stating, “I’ve done gymnastics on broken ribs, my two broken big toes—shattered because they’re not just broken; they’re shattered in pieces—kidney stones, I’ve been through sexual abuse. I came back to the sport. There’re so many barriers that I’ve gotten past...you can see I’m not a quitter. I’m a fighter...I put myself first for once.”

Scholars have demonstrated how sports media are instrumental in shaping and transmitting ideas about [race](#), [gender](#), and [sexuality](#). Often, such narratives only serve to preserve and reinforce the status quo, rarely disrupting prevailing ideas about power, identity, or society. Amina Adjepong and Ben Carrington have termed Black women

athletes “[space invaders](#)” because they challenge fundamental understandings of sports as a male and a white space. Instead of being robust, fully realized people containing multitudes, Black women athletes are often reduced to one-dimensional versions of themselves who can only be one part of their perceived identity at a single time.

The refusals of Osaka and Biles serve as a turning point for Black female athletes taking autonomy of their bodies *and* narratives. It is also an insistence on their full humanity. Osaka says in her documentary that she started to believe her worth was tied to being good at tennis, which is an understandable response to a society who conditionally celebrates athletic Black women and girls when they are laboring and performing but will quickly dispose of them if they can’t or won’t fit into pre-packaged respectable narratives often told in sports media.

By using a variety of tools, particularly outside of traditional sports media spaces, Biles and Osaka are but two prominent examples of Black women who are attempting to control their own narratives and forcing us to reckon with the limitations of contemporary sports media. Over the last year we have seen athletes [write articles](#), use [Instagram lives](#), [produce documentaries](#) and make [Tik Toks](#) to center their voice in the telling of their stories. Black women athletes are providing a blueprint for how marginalized athletes can begin to tell their own stories. Furthermore, the narratives they offer disrupt the status quo in sports media while also harnessing the visible platform of sports to challenge prevailing ideas about race, gender, and sexuality writ large. ■



Naomi Osaka competes in the Tokyo Olympic Games.

CONTRIBUTORS



CONTRIBUTORS



NATALIE BROWN-DEVLIN

(Ph.D., University of Alabama) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Advertising & Public Relations at UT Austin and the Associate Director for Research for the Center for Sports Communication & Media. Her primary research interests include social identity, sport crisis communication, and digital media.



MICHAEL L. BUTTERWORTH

is the Director of the Center for Sports Communication & Media, Governor Ann W. Richards Chair for the Texas Program in Sports and Media, and Professor of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. His research focuses on relationships between rhetoric, democracy, and sports.



AMIRA ROSE DAVIS

is an Assistant Professor of History and African American Studies at Penn State University where she specializes in 20th Century American History with an emphasis on race, gender, sports, and politics. She is currently the 2021-2022 Harrington Faculty Fellow at The University of Texas-Austin.



QINYAN GAO

is a PhD student in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research projects explore stress coping, privacy management, relationship maintenance, and stigma management in family, relational and health contexts.



OLIVIA GELLAR

is a second year master's student in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Her primary research interests explore the rhetoric of public controversies and the rhetoric of opposition voices, investigating their use of social media to gain and maintain power.



KATHRYN HARTZELL

is a PhD student in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at The University of Texas at Austin. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on globalization, cultural hybridization, global streaming platforms, and transnational sports media.

CONTRIBUTORS



POOJA IYER

is a doctoral student of Advertising at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research interest lies in the intersection of politics, consumer behavior, and media technologies. Previously, she has spent close to a decade in the advertising industry managing media strategy of U.S. clients. She completed her Masters at Syracuse University.



JAMIE JELINEK

is a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research primarily focuses on rhetorical ethics and the negotiation of identity and power in digital settings.



LILY KUNDA

is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at The University of Texas at Austin. Lily's research focuses on contemporary issues in black popular culture with particular interest in constructions of race and identity on television and corporate activism relating to black social justice movements.



KATIE LEVER

is a former Division 1 athlete and a current doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, where she studies NCAA discourse and the intersections of sport and society.



JESSICA LUTHER

is an investigative journalist who has written extensively on the intersection of sports and gendered violence. Her writing has most recently appeared at USA Today, Los Angeles Times, Texas Monthly, and Vox. Her latest book is *Loving Sports When They Don't Love You Back* (co-authored with Kavitha Davidson).



JENNIFER MCCLEAREN

is a feminist media scholar who examines the cultural production of difference in sports media. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at The University of Texas at Austin. She published her first monograph, *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC*, in 2021.

CONTRIBUTORS



SOYA NAH

is a doctoral student in the Stan Richard School of Advertising and Public Relations at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests focus on health communication, specifically message features and psychological factors in promoting health behaviors. In addition, she explores how information technologies and their offered mediated experiences change individuals' health-related risk perceptions.



VINCENT PEÑA

is a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin. His research explores the intersection of sports media, culture, and politics. He is a graduate affiliate with the Center for Sports Communication & Media.



MACKENZIE PIKE

(MA, The University of Alabama) is a second year Ph.D. student in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, focusing on interpersonal communication. An avid tennis player, Mackenzie's research examines language effects, deception, and communication in sport and gender.



NATHANIEL REPAY

is a second-year doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. His research interests are primarily in exploring the relationship between communication and social order. He is a passionate fan of the Chicago Cubs, Milwaukee Bucks, and Green Bay Packers.



The University of Texas at Austin
Center for Sports Communication & Media
Moody College of Communication

300 W. Dean Keeton (A0900)
Austin, TX 78712-1069
512-471-1931
moody.utexas.edu/centers/sports-communication-media



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