

BLACK WOMEN ATHLETES TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR OWN NARRATIVES

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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



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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. ■

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Naomi Osaka competes in the Tokyo Olympic Games.

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