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**Sports Journalism and
Women Athletes
Coverage of Coming
Out Stories**

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CHAPTER 1

From Scandalous Outing to Casual Acknowledgment

Abstract This chapter begins by providing an overview of this project which examines how sports journalists covered the coming out stories of tennis champion and feminist icon Billie Jean King and basketball superstars Sheryl Swoopes and Brittney Griner. However, the chapter primarily focuses on providing a detailed account of the events and circumstances surrounding King's outing, and the coming announcements of Swoopes and Griner.

Keywords Billie Jean King · Sheryl Swoopes · Brittney Griner · Sports journalism

Much has been written about the vast disparity in media attention given to women athletes in comparison with their male counterparts (e.g., Adams and Tuggle 2004; Billings and Young 2015; Bruce 2013; Cooky et al. 2013). For example, in one study Cooky et al. (2015) found that all but 3.2% of stories on local network affiliate sportscasts and 2% of stories on ESPN's *SportsCenter* were about men. Such findings are so prevalent that scholar Toni Bruce (2013) reports a colleague once said there was no need for additional content analyses comparing the discrepancies in the coverage of men's and women's sports. However, Bruce rightly notes that such convincing evidence regarding the symbolic annihilation of women in sports

media “is important because it identifies ideologies and practices that... point to a critical marking of sport as male territory” (p. 128).

Further underlying the lack of coverage is the historic presumption that female athletes are lesbians, given that sports are perceived as masculine pursuits (Dann and Everbach 2016; Hardin et al. 2009). Researchers have found that the media response to the presence of lesbians in sports has been one of silence, or at best, only an occasional story (Hardin and Whiteside 2010; Kane and Lenskyj 1998).

However, there are signs that media coverage of sexuality issues in sports is improving (Lenskyj 2013). In recent years, several studies of the coming out announcements of gay male athletes have found coverage to be strongly favorable (e.g., Billings et al. 2015; Cassidy 2017b; Kian et al. 2015). And although “coverage of lesbian athletes is colored by a different set of inequalities and prejudices” (Moscowitz et al. 2019, p. 252), such findings hint that perhaps some progress has been made in coverage of prominent women athletes who come out. Furthermore, there are other factors that suggest an improved landscape for media coverage of lesbian athletes, such as increasing public support of gay athletes, the decline of homophobia in society (Anderson 2011), and research showing support for lesbian athletes by their heterosexual teammates (Anderson and Bullingham 2015).

Therefore, to address the state of coverage, as well as assess any changes and developments, this book examines how journalists framed the coming out stories of three well-known women athletes: tennis champion and feminist icon Billie Jean King and basketball superstars Sheryl Swoopes and Brittney Griner. When King was outed in 1981, it marked perhaps the first time journalists were forced to directly discuss lesbian athletes in sports. Swoopes’ coming out in 2005 was hailed as a historic moment because of her high profile in a major team sport and her status as one of the best women’s basketball players in history (Voepel 2005; Zirin 2005). Griner came out shortly being selected the No. 1 pick in the WNBA draft in 2013, during what many have called a more receptive environment for gay and lesbian athletes (Anderson 2015; Dann and Everbach 2016; Lenskyj 2013; Morris 2013; Stott 2019). By directly analyzing and comparing coverage of these three athletes, this research will provide an overview of how journalists have covered lesbian athletes in professional sports over the past 35+ years, and by focusing on the routines of journalistic work, it will provide additional insight into the depth and quality of coverage. Such information is especially important given the historic perception of sports journalism as

a field lacking in standards compared to other forms of the profession and as one that often fails to address sociological, political, and economic issues connected to sports (Rowe 2007; Salwen and Garrison 1998), such as the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian athletes.

The remainder of this chapter offers a detailed account of the events surrounding the coming out announcements of King, Swoopes and Griner. Chapter 2 will discuss several streams of pertinent literature, such as the aforementioned lack of coverage for women athletes and the more receptive environment for gay and lesbian athletes. Chapter 3 will provide an outline of the theoretical (media sociology) and methodological (content analysis) frameworks employed here and report the findings of a pair of research studies conducted examining media coverage of each athlete's coming out story. Chapter 4 will assess the results of the studies in terms of whether or not journalists took a more critical perspective in their stories about King, Swoopes and Griner and include comments from interviews with prominent gay and lesbian sports journalists. For additional context, the chapter will compare the findings to similar studies of former NBA player Jason Collins and former football All-American, Michael Sam, the two most prominent male athletes in major team sports to come out (Cassidy 2017a, b).

BILLIE JEAN KING

Few athletes in history have been as influential as tennis champion Billie Jean King, both in terms of her sporting accomplishments and societal impact. King, born in 1943, held the No. 1 ranking five times and won 39 Grand Slam titles, including 20 at Wimbledon (Frey 2006; Shuster 2013). In 1971, she became the first female athlete to earn more than \$100,000 in a season, an occasion that prompted a congratulatory phone call from US President Richard Nixon (Buzinski 2011). *Sports Illustrated* named her—along with legendary basketball coach John Wooden—its Sportsperson of the Year in 1972, making her the first woman to be so honored, and in 1987, she was elected into the International Tennis Hall of Fame. As further testament to her legacy as one of the sport's greatest champions, in 2006 the United States Tennis Association (USTA) decided to rename the National Tennis Center in New York, home of the US Open, in her honor. Reports said it was the most prominent sports facility named for a woman (Sandomir 2006). Observers hailed the significance of this honor in an age where stadium naming rights are often sold to the highest bidder (Sandomir 2006;

Ware 2011). It was estimated that the USTA lost out on more than \$4 million annually with this decision. “Think about it; I didn’t have to pay \$10 trillion for this,” King said (Sandomir, para. 17).

But, King’s reach has gone far beyond tennis. Indeed, officials of the USTA said that one of the reasons they named the tennis center after her was because of “the impact Billie Jean has had on tennis and society” (Sandomir 2006, para. 20). King has long been a tireless advocate for equality—for everyone (Sweeney 2008). At age 12, she had an epiphany that “I was going to spend the rest of my life fighting for equal rights and equal opportunities for boys and girls, men and women” (Shuster 2013, para. 15). “I want to change things,” King said in the HBO documentary “Billie Jean King: Portrait of a Pioneer,” realizing that her talent could help with that goal. “I was very clear that unless I was No. 1, no one was going to listen to me...If God gave me this gift, I was going to do everything in my power to make this world a better place” (Frey 2006, para. 3).

She began by advocating for change in tennis, serving as one of the prime catalysts in establishing the women’s professional tour (Frey 2006). “We wanted to make a women’s tour. We wanted to make a living playing tennis. We wanted to take tennis to the people. Women athletes were still treated like freaks,” King said (Howard 2005, p. 35). According to Ware (2011), King’s desire to move women’s tennis into the professional ranks was “accompanied by a desire to wrest its control from the elite, country-club set” (p. 30) noting that King’s interest in women’s issues only came later. But, nonetheless that change had a wider impact than perhaps she could have imagined. Johnette Howard (2005), in her book detailing the decades-long rivalry between Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova, said that because King “didn’t focus only on her own individual athletic achievement, an entire class of female sports stars was created” (p. 35) when the tour started, including Evert and Navratilova.

King led the way in forming the Women’s Tennis Association—calling the player’s union her most meaningful achievement and served as its’ first president. A longtime advocate of forming a union, she initially faced resistance from some players who didn’t see it as necessary (King and Deford 1982). “So often, athletes look everywhere else for the answers to their problems, but to themselves,” King said. “Yet, they’re the people who are unhappy with the status quo! Athletes have to be convinced that it’s in their own interest to set up and control their own organizations” (Ware 2011, p. 38).

As further testament to her philosophy of challenging the status quo, King said she wouldn't defend her 1972 US Open title because she received \$15,000 less than the men's champion. She further suggested that many other women would also boycott the tournament unless something was done about the disparity in pay. Officials took her seriously, and in the following year, the US Open became the first major tennis tournament to offer equal prize money for both men and women (Schwartz, n.d.; Ware 2011). And while King's efforts in establishing women's professional tennis were already intertwined with the feminist movement, this hallmark achievement further "solidified the impression that she was an advocate for women's liberation" (Spencer 2000, p. 389) even though she had some issues with what she perceived as the stridency and lack of pragmatism in the movement. "You're not using us right... We're [tennis players] out here doing and proving all these same things so many of you are only talking about," she reportedly told Gloria Steinem. "You guys keep thinking from the neck up and it's the whole body—the whole body—that makes women powerful. And empowered" (Howard 2005). In addition, King, in her 1982 autobiography co-authored with Frank Deford, wrote, "So many of the more outspoken feminist really had so little in common with me... Often I disliked the feminists because they were so doctrinaire. I was supposed to agree to their whole agenda, but I simply don't fall into any neat niche" (King and Deford 1982, p. 160). Susan Ware, author of *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, said, "I think the feminist movement needed Billie Jean King a lot more than she needed them" (Sweeney 2008, para. 7). In fact, Roberts (2005a) described her as the "face, body and spirit" of the women's movement (p. 150).

King's status as a feminist icon was forever cemented with her resounding 6-4, 6-3, 6-3 victory over Bobby Riggs on September 20, 1973 at the Houston Astrodome in Texas. Looking back more than 45 years later, it seems a bit odd that her win over a former Wimbledon men's champion nearly twice her age would still be hailed as "an indelible turning point in history" (Roberts 2005a, p. 1), and the subject of a 2017 movie starring Oscar winner Emma Stone titled *Battle of the Sexes*. Yet, King still refers to it as "the most important moment in my life" (King 2018) while Ware says "because of the 1973 Battle of the Sexes, Billie Jean King will always be linked in the popular consciousness with the powerful ideas of modern feminism" (p. 213).

In order to understand why, it is important to consider the various contextual issues accompanying the match. At the time King and other women