

You can't be what you CAN'T SEE

UQ's Associate Professor Sarah Kelly tackles the power of women's sport and tells how Australia's elite female athletes are inspiring hope and optimism for a society seeking equality.

If you're asked to recall some of the most memorable moments in Australian sport, there are likely to be some outstanding examples of female athletes.

Who can forget Cathy Freeman winning a gold medal in the 400 metres at the Sydney 2000 Olympics, jockey Michelle Payne winning the 2015 Melbourne Cup on Prince of Penzance, and the Matildas triumph in the Tournament of Nations in 2017?

How about the first Olympic rugby sevens gold medal in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, Australia's incredible Women's Twenty20 World Cup win in 2018, and the famous lockout forced by an overwhelming crowd at the inaugural AFLW game at Melbourne's Ikon Park in 2017?

All these moments absolutely deserve a place alongside any male sporting success, but they also represent pivotal times of social change. They demonstrate the power of women's sport that transcends sport itself: by empowering women; showcasing strength, leadership and resilience as female traits; and inspiring hope and optimism for a society seeking equality and inclusion of not only gender minorities, but all minorities.

This is the refreshing narrative of women's sport and a key driver of its continued professionalism and commercialisation – the rising star in the \$600 billion burgeoning sports sector.

Sport, as a significant vehicle for social change, is the reason I have focused research in this exciting and impactful field. It is also the reason I am involved in the administration of professional sport, teach sports law and governance, and mentor startup businesses in sports innovation.

Sport, particularly the case of women's sport, is now established as a platform for equality, economic development, health and employability. The uniquely

global and cross-cultural platform has the power to elicit enormous change in a world struggling for fairness. It is a beacon of light for the voiceless and inspires beyond the spectacle of the performance.

Positive advances in gender equality are on the rise in the 21st century, and issues of blatant discrimination are less frequent. Nonetheless, there are still major inequities when it comes to the exposure and remuneration of female athletes. In Australia, women who participate in sport generally receive nominal recognition and inequitable payment in comparison to their male counterparts.

While some promising developments have been made – particularly within sports like netball, rugby sevens, cricket and the Australian Football League (AFL) – research shows there are still many obstacles that prevent women from engaging in sport on a level playing field. As semi-professional athletes, women must either come from wealthy families who can support them financially, or hold down other jobs to generate income through the off-season.

This reality leads to a cyclical problem for the commercialism of women's sport, as sponsors typically want to fund an attractive commercial asset – a high-performing sports team.

Discriminatory media coverage of female athletes is therefore a serious issue. The media plays a key role in shaping the public's perception of an athlete. Unfortunately, female athletes are hugely underrepresented across all forms of media in Australia.

This lack of media coverage makes it even more difficult for female athletes to secure sponsors, attract fans, and promote their work. This is a cyclical, wicked problem as less commercialisation and coverage inhibits



Image: © Tristan Furney - Football Federation Australia

sport's ability to attract star players and exhibit an exciting spectacle. You can't be what you can't see, so women's sport, in partnership with the community, must find a way to be visible.

Women's sport is an attractive and unique proposition in a purpose-led brand world, yet the rate of commercialisation of women's sport is not meeting the burgeoning growth experienced globally in women's sport participation.

There is evidence that women's sport embodies differing values and brand associations to men's sports that uniquely resonate with a highly engaged and growing female consumer and audience. Surely targeting females as the main overseers of household-budgets and the major influencers on junior participation, in addition to resonating with an increasingly activist community, is a worthy cause?

Sponsorship activation in this relatively uncluttered space is an opportunity to elevate women's visibility and dismantle misguided stereotypes – a powerful corporate message in an age of equality.

Social media is a very effective and uninhibited avenue for female sportspeople and teams to connect with fans, sponsors

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Associate Professor Sarah Kelly is the marketing discipline leader in the UQ Business School. She has interdisciplinary expertise in marketing, psychology and law and is globally known for her research and consulting in sports marketing and law. Associate Professor Kelly is also an educational specialist, having won awards for her tertiary teaching and leadership of the UQ MBA program. She is widely published in the sports field, with recent projects including sports scandal impacts, sports corruption, mega sporting event legacy, sponsorship metrics, women's sport and Esports. She holds several non-executive directorships, including Deputy Chair of the Brisbane Lions AFL Football Club, Tourism and Events Queensland, The Gregory Terrace Foundation, and the Wandering Warriors. She is also a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors National Education Advisory Board and the State Minister's Sport Advisory Council.



Australian tennis star and 2019 French Open winner Ash Barty.

Image: Getty Images

and media, and many are leveraging this better than male athletes. Examples include US women's soccer team captain Alex Morgan, one of the most globally followed sportspeople on social media, transcending her sport in leading the challenge for equal pay in soccer. In Australia, AFLW player Taylor Harris has also transcended her sport using the same platform that trolled her over a photo now known simply as 'The Kick', calling out online bullying and inspiring the nation in doing so.

Stories like these embody a different narrative to men's sport and are built upon a frugal innovation necessitated by inaccessibility to prime coverage and consequently prime endorsements. In essence, women are the unicorns emerging from a new, borderless consumption of sport increasingly facilitated through social media.

Women's sport is challenged with some unique issues, including injury susceptibility, concussion effects, maternity leave, facility access, sexism and discrimination to name a few.

It is a relief that several recent studies have demonstrated that athleticism, not sex, sells women's sport. The days of the Lingerie Football League have been replaced by the gladiatorial arena and gripping spectacle of high-contact female sports, from mixed martial arts to rugby and AFL. With this, comes the transformational message for young girls, women and men: that women are strong, they are resilient, they are leaders, and they are equal.

Spectators of high-contact women's sports are shocked at the extent of contact and brutality. The reason these women play with so much heart is not that they're crazy or ill-trained in the game, but that they are playing for the moment. They didn't grow up thinking they would be able to play the elite sports that their brothers, fathers and heroes played.

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Many of the new national competitions have effectively been startup experiments, which are doing very well but carry no clear promise of a fully professionalised and equalised future. They are therefore playing for 'now', and ever so grateful for the opportunity. There is no violence, abuse, or scandal here. Just leaders. These women aren't just performing on the field, but are working hard and honestly off the field as role models to young boys and girls, and as instigators of change.

Finally – and perhaps most importantly – in order to reduce discrimination, there needs to be a cultural shift in the way female athletes are perceived in sport and society more broadly. Several government initiatives have already been rolled out in an attempt to address this problem, including Victoria's Safe and Strong program, the national 'Our Watch' initiative and Ireland's brilliant 20x20 campaign, which aims to increase participation, attendance and media coverage of women's sport by 20 per cent by 2020.

These programs aim to change cultural perceptions and dismantle stereotypes, and are – together with the faces of women's sport – steadily shifting the dial in engendering equality in sport and society.

So, when I think of women's sport, I think of incredible athleticism and leadership. I think of an absence of scandal and an abundance of trust. I think of the Brisbane Lions AFLW team spending an hour after each game meeting supporters and signing merchandise when they are exhausted and sometimes injured. I think of champion surfer Layne Beachley's fundraising and scholarships initiative, social justice crusader Billie Jean King forging a path for women's tennis players, Ash Barty humbly stealing the 2019 French Open tennis title, and Steph Gilmore carving up the surf alongside male world champions.

It's not women's sport – it's sport. And it's a whole lot more than that. ■