

# The future of women's sport sponsorship

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"Not bad for a girl..." Possibly the phrase which female professional athletes dread most and an accurate indication of all that is very wrong when it comes to the sponsorship landscape within women's sport. Women's sport has long been, and continues to be, perceived as inferior to male sports with a false societal perception that women don't run as fast, can't jump as high, throw as hard or hit it as far as their male counterparts.

We applaud those who equal the winning purse for male and female competitors, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it sometimes feels somewhat insincere. If the societal stigma rings true that women have less stamina and strength, surely the converse should apply and women should receive the higher valued prize for completing the same course as their male counterparts who are in a better position physically to achieve the task at hand?



And what about the skills that female athletes have had to perfect in order to overcome this lack of perceived power? The dedication, hard work and sheer determination to succeed against the odds, should this not be acknowledged?

Sponsorship of women's sport has increased, but the question must be asked regarding how authentic these sponsorships really are. Are brands and big corporations sponsoring women's sports to tick the right boxes as a result of societal uproar or do they really believe in the power of associating with women's sports?

## Current Women's Sport Sponsorship Landscape

The Covid - 19 pandemic caused havoc within the sporting industry in general in 2020 and the effects will be felt for many years to come. Women's sports definitely drew the short end of the coronavirus stick with a host of different sporting codes cancelling their 2020 seasons. Sponsorship in women's sport is very limited as is and with the reality of severe budget cuts brands, are likely to have even less money to spend on sponsorships in 2021 and beyond.

It isn't all just doom and gloom however, in the long run, a shift in where and how budgets are allocated as a result of the

coronavirus pandemic might just be the wake-up call that the industry desperately needs to adjust their approach when it comes to sponsorship of women's sport.

Brands are under pressure to find creative alternatives with unlimited marketing budgets being a thing of the past. Coupled with a drastic change in consumer behaviour in the last 6 to 12 months as a demand for authenticity and accountability comes to the fore, brands need to connect to their audiences in a meaningful way... with a fraction of their normal budget.

"Pivot" became the 2020 buzzword as brands hustled to find new markets, new opportunities and new offerings in order to survive and capitalise on market conditions. It required marketers and brand managers to take a step back and re-assess marketing strategies with new objectives in place. Ample opportunities exist for brands within the realm of women's sports, particularly in terms of reaching new audiences and fostering positive brand association, however, the question remains – will brands be willing to commit and take this leap?

## **Why Consider Women's Sport?**

A study conducted by Nielsen Sport revealed that women's sports are perceived as more progressive, less money-driven and more family oriented than men's sport. Additionally, women are also more inspired by women's sport than what they are by men's sport. This alone creates a massive opportunity for brands to reach a large, predominantly untapped market.

Megan Rapinoe, Breanna Stewart, Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka and our very own Caster Semenya are some of the most inspirational athletes of our time. They are not only inspirational in terms of their achievements in their respective sporting codes, but away from competition they are equally passionate activists for creating awareness of pressing societal issues.

## **Inspiring against all odds**

It is no secret that female athletes earn a fraction of what their male counterparts do in both pay and press coverage – with female professional cycling being a stark reminder. According to recent statistics, 25% of female professional cyclists earn no salary and rely strictly on prize money to survive, 50% work a second job to earn ends meet and only the top 25% of female professional riders earn salaries that meet the minimum wage criteria stipulated for male professional teams by governing body, UCI.

Professional golf follows a similar trend. Prize money for the leading earners on the LPGA Tour is a 10th of what their male counterparts earn on the PGA Tour and this disparity in earnings only gets bigger when endorsement earnings form part of the equation.

Female athletes continue to excel besides the odds that are heavily stacked against them. Brands are taking notice but more needs to be done to support the unsung heroes of women's sport and to inspire the next Megan Rapinoe, Serena Williams or Caster Semenya.

## **What's next for women's sport?**

Professional female sports teams, leagues and tournament hosts have a responsibility towards athletes. Creating opportunities and committing resources towards the growth of female sports fan bases is vital to ensure the growth of women's sport.

Sponsoring a women's sporting property should not become a box ticking exercise however, particularly as authenticity and accountability take centre stage. The time is now for brands to change their, and their audience's perceptions around women's sport and sponsorship thereof. Female athletes deserve investment from brands not just because they are women but because they are some of the best and most respected athletes in the world.

Iconic sports brand, Nike, was one of the first to take a more inclusive approach to marketing before equality was even

trending and the increase in sales in women's professional kits indicate that women deserve more recognition – both as consumers and participants – within the world of sport.

The women's sport sponsorship arena is filled with unexplored opportunities and those who are willing to take on these challenges will reap the benefits. The world's best female professional athletes give it their all on a daily basis, isn't it time for the industry to hold ourselves to these same standards?

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