

Condensed from **WATCHING THE PROS VS. PLAYING THE GAME:
HOW SPORTS COVERAGE AFFECTS COMMUNITY-LEVEL ATHLETES**

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We are a media nation. At virtually any hour of the day or night, Canadians can access up-to-the-minute sports scores, commentaries and actual games. While some of the smaller newspapers and television stations cover community sport, the vast majority of stories in mainstream media focus on professional games, highly paid athletes and related scandals.

Given the tremendous potential the media have to influence us, the portrayal of sport has an impact on how young Canadians see themselves and define their goals and values. Youths are influenced by what they see on television and in the sports pages. Largely, youths need some sort of identification with a player to feel a connection and perhaps to believe they could have a place participating in a particular sport.

Media coverage can create communities. News professionals decide what gets covered, in what way, and how often. Because our country is vast, we rely on the media to create a community for us—a place where we can see ourselves reflected to each other. In reality, minorities are excluded or marginalized.

This content analysis explores the kinds of stories being covered, their recurrent themes and underlying values. It estimates proportions of professional versus amateur coverage, and offers some idea of the range of diversity (gender, colour, disability, region). Four newspapers were surveyed: a national newspaper (*The Globe and Mail*), a French language provincial newspaper (*La Presse*), a large metropolitan daily (*The London Free Press*), and a community weekly (*Journal Argus, St. Mary's, ON*). One week was chosen randomly from each season from spring 2002 through winter 2003, with the 2002 winter Olympics deliberately excluded as not representing what Canadians see on a regular basis. Evidence from television news and sports broadcasts, as well as both public and private radio, are included in the discussion in a more general way.

CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS

The vast majority of national mainstream media coverage is about professional sports. The metropolitan daily paper and TV station offered 30% coverage of amateur sport. The community weekly focused almost exclusively on local sports, profiling professional athletes only if they were originally from the area.

Most stories, professional and amateur, are 'hard news' stories that cover winning and losing. The process of the game is divorced from the outcome. The top themes are winning, money, ownership, coaching and game-winning skills. Statistics and scoreboards take up significant amounts of space, giving the impression that scores, standings and outcomes matter most. These stories give little background or discussion of other aspects of the game.

The weekly local paper tends to report community sport with an emphasis on skills and game chronology with the outcome near the end of the story. The effect is that while winning is obviously important, being skillful, playing your position and supporting your team are also part of the community news agenda. The effect of reading about the games in this manner is that winning is not as emphasized and the process is more evident than when scores are reported first.

Columns or opinion pieces are largely about pro sports and usually follow the same theme as hard news: winning. The vast majority of columns (at least 25:1 ratio) in the bigger papers are about professional sport, and themes focus on winning, money, ownership and athletes' skills. Sportsmanship as a theme only came up in reference to plays that resulted in scoring or injuries – plays that directly affected the outcome of the game – in both professional and amateur sports. Commentary writers could open a larger discussion around issues relating to fair play, the value of competition and the merits of integration of sport and community, but this rarely occurs.

For a variety of reasons, media coverage is not diverse. Sports pages and television broadcasts are still sexist, largely white and dominated by able-bodied people.

Although women are participating more and more in sport, in our sample the focus was exclusively on women only 7.5% of the time. Photos of women tend to be tightly framed headshots, not action shots, often in the 'Briefs' section. On television, more women are appearing on the sports desk, but the charge that they are being hired for their looks is often made. The implication is that Canadian women and girls are more to be 'looked at' than admired for their athletic abilities, and their accomplishments are less worthy.

From the perspective of colour, athletes of African and Spanish descent appear regularly on mainstream television. This coverage can demonstrate to Canadian kids that in the world of pro sport, colour doesn't matter, and success is not dependent on being white. However, professional athletes of colour represent only about 11% of the overall total of pro photos, which is undoubtedly low. Even less acceptable is the low number of people of colour in amateur photographs (about 3%). First Nations, people of colour and athletes with disabilities are underrepresented in pro sports coverage and they are virtually invisible in local stories and photos.

Athletes with disabilities are similarly invisible in news coverage. In the television broadcasts, only footage of able-bodied athletes was shown, and only 0.5% of the 2461 stories surveyed mention athletes with a disability. The impression is that coverage of athletes with a disability only occurs during a major tournament like the Paralympics or because they play in a unique way.

Arguably part of the media's mandate is to represent its communities to themselves and to each other. While *La Presse* is very good at playing up Quebec athletes, in general, *The Globe* and *The Free Press* don't often note a player's hometown except in a 'once-local athlete does well' profile. The impression is that urban Canada matters most and that sports aren't played in any organized fashion in the North or on reserves.

THE LARGER IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of professional sports coverage is not to encourage participation but to entertain, and its values are different from those fostered in community sport. However, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between sport played for its own sake and sport that is packaged for sale. The inordinate emphasis on final scores, and the packaging of sports highlights divorce the outcome from the process. The essential factors of the plays often become lost or are not mentioned in the coverage. Because of the influence of entertainment values in sports coverage, there are numerous instances where games become opportunities for broadcasting musical performances, parades, soap opera style profiles and other material unrelated to athletic pursuits.

The purpose of media coverage of pro sport is to deliver audiences to advertisers. Media outlets devote significant time and resources to sport coverage. Both advertisers and the media know their target audience

for sports is men between the ages of 18 and 40.

Professional sports coverage is big business. It has become an integral part of the entertainment industry and embraces the same values: conflict, aggression, violence and winning at all costs. Sport is easily used for the purpose of entertainment because the pursuit of athletic excellence is entertaining, a contest filled with challenges, risks, violence, victory and defeat. The win comes at any cost: there is not much media condemnation of the use of performance enhancing substances, and players that choose to play despite being injured are rewarded with flattering coverage.

It's clear that being a winner means money, popularity and national celebrity. Through media exposure, athletes are commodified and used as tools to win. While athletes are on top of their game and winning, they are valuable sales tools for large corporations who transform them into celebrities through endorsements. Athletes become role models because of their athletic achievement, but as celebrities their behaviour off the field becomes news. Questionable personal values and unethical behaviours can become accepted as part of the equation.

Sport language is not neutral. Some contests like football and hockey are hyped as "masculine" pursuits, while others like curling are considered less important and "feminine." Military terminology normalizes aggression and devalues skills, sportsmanship and fair play. The "sharp shooters" and "snipers" take shots with "laser-like" precision; they "batter," "annihilate," and "trample" their opponents. This type of talk indirectly supports violence and excludes discussions about fairness, participation and skill.

One word that is noticeably absent from all the sports coverage is "fun." While most people agree that playing community sports is supposed to be fun, the term "fun" appeared only once in all the coverage surveyed, and it was used in a sarcastic manner.

Local sports are played in a broad context and that environment is one that's largely created by media coverage. In general, the media set the parameters for the discussion and have an impact on ideas, attitudes and behaviours. And in many cases, local sports are framed in nearly identical ways to professional stories. This implies to our youths that the issues are the same. So while we might want to separate professional from community coverage, or say that we *see* pro sport but *live* amateur, the distinction is simply not that clear.



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THE SYMPOSIUM'S purpose is to initiate a compelling dialogue on a national scale about community sport in Canada. In the context of the Symposium, community sport is broadly defined to include sport targeted to children and youth that is conducted and participated in at the community level, including community sport clubs and leagues, and school sport programs and curricula. The core questions to be addressed at the Symposium are: Why is community sport failing to achieve its potential to positively influence the moral and personal development of youth and strengthen communities? How is values-based sport conducted and experienced at the community level? What kind of sport do we want?

Six papers have been commissioned for the Symposium to consider key topics relevant to attaining an in-depth understanding of the current practice of community sport in Canada. The papers' topics include Canadians' expectations of community sport, ethical issues affecting community sport, the impact of professional sport and the media, what can be learned from other sectors, and examples of community sport achieving its potential.

REGIONAL CONSULTATIONS to review and validate the key ideas in the commissioned papers are being held across Canada in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Québec and Nova Scotia. Each workshop will have approximately 25 participants comprised of youths and parents involved in community sport, community sport system officials and volunteers, and other relevant groups such as public school teachers, local media, municipal program managers, city planners and sponsors of community sport. The workshops will be focusing on these questions: Are the issues identified in the papers the real issues? Are there issues that have not been identified? What are real life examples or concerns that demonstrate the real issues?

AN INITIATIVE UNDER THE CANADIAN STRATEGY FOR ETHICAL CONDUCT IN SPORT. The Strategy has a comprehensive policy framework and ten-year action plan for placing ethics and values at the center of Canadian sport. It is a joint initiative of the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Governments, the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, Athletes CAN, the Canadian Olympic Committee and the Canadian Professional Coaches Association, and involves broad-based collaboration with other sport organizations, community groups, institutions and individuals across Canada. The Sport We Want Symposium has been identified as a priority action for the Strategy in 2003.