

# Jackie Robinson's Legacy and Women "Cross-over Athletes": A Comparison of *The New York Times*' Coverage

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**Abstract:** This article compares coverage by *The New York Times* of Jackie Robinson's groundbreaking entry into Major League Baseball with the participation of four women athletes in male-only sporting spaces. This comparison and analysis reveals the role of this specific print media in naturalizing sex differences that justify sex segregation and gender injustice; in contrast to media discourse that correlates racial segregation with racial injustice. This contrast illuminates the role of sport as *cultural theatre* to model and support social hierarchy while drawing attention to the malleability of essentialist notions of identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Almost sixty years ago Jackie Robinson made history as the first African-American to play major league baseball, thereby ending the practice of racial segregation in this sport. Every once in a while a newspaper runs a feature story on the incredible improvements in women's athletic performance and asks the unthinkable: will women's performances ever match those of men's? The possibility that women can compete with and against men on the playing field is controversial because the differences between the athletic abilities of men and women seem so obvious. Men are bigger, stronger and faster: 'everyone' *knows* that, or at least takes it for granted [1]. But thinking about the relatively recent changes in the perception of race as a legally appropriate category for segregating people begs the question: might we view sex segregation as equally unjust one day? After all, everyone, well, many whites that is, used to *know* that whites were physically and intellectually superior to persons from other races; now ideologies of white supremacy are no longer scientifically, legally or morally accepted, at least not in the mainstream. While gender inequality persists, feminists have been somewhat successful in challenging many formal barriers to the full participation of women in society. And recent postmodern queer feminist scholarship is taking full aim at the naturalness of sexual dimorphism. Might sport be in for another shake-up? Could Jackie Robinson's legacy of racial integration provide a basis for ending coercive sex discrimination in sport [2]?

Since the early 1990s several women "crossover athletes" [3] have competed with and against men in typically male-only sporting arenas. These women include Manon Rheame and Hayley Wickenheiser in the team sport of hockey and Annika Sorenstam and Michelle Wie in the individual sport of golf. In this article I present a comparative discursive analysis of *The New York Times* coverage of Jackie Robinson's groundbreaking participation in the formerly all-

white sport of Major League Baseball with that regarding the participation of these four women in all-male sporting arenas. This analysis is based on themes relating to ideas about bodily identity/difference and the relationship between segregation and social justice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1947 Branch Rickey explained his decision to include a black man on a major league baseball roster for the first time by saying that he'd "play an elephant in center field if the elephant could play better than a man" [4]. The racism expressed in his comparison of Jackie Robinson to an elephant stands in sharp contrast to Major League Baseball's self-congratulatory stance fifty years later as it celebrated Jackie Robinson as a hero and touted the integration of the league as a contribution to the (mythical) 'end' of racism in America. Since 1947, the presence of minority men in the big business of at least three major league sports - Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball League (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL) - has become not only taken-for-granted but essential for the cultural and commercial viability of these sports. While minority participation in the National Hockey League (NHL) lags far behind, there is no formal colour bar in that or any other sport today. The commercial nature of major league sports puts a premium on fielding a winning team. Racial stacking continues to be a factor, particularly in baseball and football [5], and racist stereotypes of black physicality versus white intellect and work ethic persist in media coverage and "common sense" [6]. But for the most part and certainly officially, superior athletic ability is privileged over race in securing a position on a team or in achieving individual success in amateur and professional sporting arenas.

While women's sports have developed considerably in the last thirty years, the most lucrative team sports (NBA, NFL, MLB and the NHL) remain closed to women. Indeed, only one woman, goalie Manon Rheame, has ever played in an NHL game and both of the games she appeared in occurred in the pre-season (exhibition). There are still no elephants or other animals playing in the elite male-only

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arenas of professional sport and there are no women either: are the possibilities equally absurd? Are sex differences so profound as to legitimate the coercive segregation of the sexes in most amateur and professional sports [2] and to justify the staggering disparity in overall professional earnings between men and women? [7, 8] Or is it possible that assumptions about sex difference are as implicated in social injustice as assumptions about racial difference have been? While the histories of racism and sexism in North America are incommensurable [9] - and interlocking - there are parallels relating to taken for granted beliefs about fundamental biological differences that are worth exploring in the context of sport.

Common sense beliefs about biological differences in terms of race remain in the consciousness of many westerners but these beliefs reflect an association of people of African descent with the physical side of the mind/body dualism prevalent in western thinking [10] that results in an expectation of athletic super-competence [5]. In contrast, the association of women of all races (albeit in different ways depending on racial identity) with the body is one that connotes both physical and mental inferiority. Beliefs about biological, immutable, differences between the sexes doom women to athletic inferiority. As Hoberman instructs, however, prior to black athletic achievements on the world stage, - Jesse Owens' performance at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin (he won four gold medals in track) was a watershed moment - assumptions about 'negro' inferiority extended to both physical and mental realms. [11] The malleability of essentialist notions has been demonstrated time and again. Much as eugenics, the science of racial difference, has been revealed to be fundamentally pseudo-scientific [12] the validity of research documenting sex differences has come under fire. According to Hubbard "Women's biology is a social construct and a political concept, not a scientific one" [13]. In related work, Fausto-Sterling [14] and Haraway [15, 16], demonstrate first, that research into sex differences is contaminated by assumptions that such differences exist, and, secondly, that the two-sex system itself is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but rather an ideological mechanism for legitimating gender inequality. Sport's role in contributing to gender injustice includes its institutionalization of sex difference and corresponding reinforcement of sexism, heteronormativity and homophobia [17-21].

Sport is a key institution for showcasing and reinforcing normative ideas about essential sex and gender difference that support gender injustice in society more broadly. [17] As Hall notes, much of the social function of sport involves emphasizing the differences between men and women and celebrating traditional (and narrow) notions of masculinity [22]. While a great deal of important sociological work on gender and sport has identified and challenged the ways in which sport naturalizes and reinforces patriarchal power and essentialist notions of sex/gender identity [1, 23, 24], most of this scholarship focuses on the need to further develop and equalize support for parallel sporting institutions for girls and women. A much smaller body of work within the sociology of sport addresses the artificiality of the sex/gender binary itself as the basis for sex segregated sport [18, 25-32]. This scholarship addresses the possibility, etched in consciousness with regard to race as a result of the landmark

U.S. Supreme Court decision Brown versus Board of Education in 1953, that separate may *never* be equal - even when it comes to sport.

In 1983, Boutilier and SanGiovanni explicitly argued for an end to sex segregated sport on the basis of its contribution to gender inequality [27]. Pronger advanced a spirited argument against sex segregation in sport as based in differences between men's and women's athletic performance that can be attributed to social, political, economic and psychological discrimination rather than biological factors. Given the cultural context within which athletes develop and perform, Pronger insisted that there is no uncontaminated data to support essential performance-related differences between men and women. Pronger recommended replacing sex segregation in sport with height and weight classifications for which there are ready precedents in boxing and wrestling [18]. In a highly influential article, Kane argued that the gender binary paradigm in sport should be replaced by a gender continuum. According to Kane, the gender binary paradigm is grounded in biologically deterministic notions of gender polarity and features an emphasis on difference and the dismissal and deliberate invisibility of similarities between male and female athletes. This invisibility is essential for upholding male dominance [29]. Theberge's research on women's ice hockey provides empirical evidence to support Kane's argument about the appropriateness of a continuum rather than a binary [30, 31]. Kane claimed that the great deal of "cultural effort" that "goes into maintaining the binary while simultaneously suppressing evidence of the continuum" alone is sufficient evidence to suggest that the differences between male and female athletic ability are more manufactured than natural and inevitable [29]. Even the Sociology textbook that I use in my introductory courses questions assumptions about essential sex differences in athletic performance by including a graph charting the drastic decrease in the gap between men's and women's marathon times between 1925 and 2005 that corresponds to improvements in the status of women [33].

Rothblatt identified sport as a key arena for the justification and reinforcement of sex-typed difference. Drawing on the earlier work of Fausto-Sterling [34], she contended that assumptions about natural differences between only two sexes are culturally rather than biologically based. According to Rothblatt,

*Separate is never equal. The segregation of women into sports competition with lower expectations than exist for men serves only to lower achievement and to preclude people with vaginas from the highest-paying sports awards. [35].*

She argued that just as racial segregation in sport has been abolished on the basis of the revelation that race is not meaningful as a biological category, so too should sex segregation. McDonagh and Pappano make a distinction between "coercive" and "voluntary" sex segregation in sport and equate the former with social injustice. The coercive basis of much of the sex segregation that structures amateur and professional sport is the cornerstone of this institution's contribution to gender injustice [2]. The cultural rather than biological basis of sex segregated sport supports an inquiry into the role of media, in this case, *The New York Times*, in

reinforcing [24] or challenging ideas about racial and sex-based difference that are implicated in structures and practices of social injustice.

Studies revealing the role of sport media in normalizing and reinforcing sexism and racism abound [1, 23]. Explaining the powerful role of mass media in constructing cultural categories and beliefs, Vincent observes that “the gendered nature of newspaper coverage of sporting events helps to define, normalize, influence, and reflect mainstream societal beliefs about professional sport” [36].

While taken for granted beliefs about sex difference are powerful and persistent, Travers claims that the “abolition of sex-based structural barriers to the participation of girls and women (in North American sport) is, arguably, only a few court cases away [17]. This very real possibility with its historical parallel in the abolition of racial segregation underscores the importance of research that documents the powerful role of cultural forces – in this case, *The New York Times* – in reinforcing or challenging taken for granted beliefs about biological difference that contribute to social injustice.

## CHANGING SPORTING CONTEXTS

### Baseball

Baseball retains a ‘quasi-religious’ status in the United States [37] and is intricately bound up with notions of masculinity. A considerable amount of scholarship chronicles the history of racial segregation in baseball and ongoing racial stacking [38, 39]. In spite of the attainment of legal inclusion for girls at the Little League level through a series of highly contested court battles the sport remains coded culturally as male and dominated by boys and men. At its highest level, MLB, there are no women players and there never have been [40]. This exclusion reflects the sport’s important role in defining masculinity and gendering citizenship in the United States (and hence rights to full participation in society) as male. In spite of the relative lack of contact between players in the sport of baseball, the association of the sport with American masculinity spurred proponents to lobby heavily for its inclusion as a contact sport to secure its exclusion from the equality provisions of Title IX (the piece of Civil Rights legislation that requires gender equity as a condition for all institutions, including educational ones, that receive federal funding) [2]. Ring’s chronicle of the systematic exclusion of American girls and women from the ‘national pastime’ [40] demonstrates that male domination of baseball at amateur and professional levels can be attributed to cultural rather than biological imperatives. As no women have ever participated in MLB it is not possible to compare *The New York Times* coverage between them and Jackie Robinson. I therefore chose four high profile crossover athletes from other sports.

### Hockey

While there is a long tradition of women playing hockey in North America, opportunities have been scant in comparison to those available to boys and men. There is no professional women’s hockey league to parallel the minor league system not to mention the National Hockey League

(NHL) and indeed no expectation that any will develop in the near future; only the establishment of women’s ice hockey as a medal sport in the 1998 Olympics has created more (non-professional) opportunities for women. Where separate leagues for girls do not exist in Canada and the United States, girls have used the courts to gain the right to play on boys’ teams [31]. But the identity of hockey as a sport is explicitly linked to masculinity and the NHL in particular is an “arena of masculinity” [18] and regardless of the increasing participation of women continues to be a male preserve [41].

In a chapter entitled “The Game of Whose Lives? Gender, Race and Entitlement in Canada’s ‘National’ Game,” Adams locates hockey in a Canada that is both male and white:

*If hockey is life in Canada, then life in Canada remains decidedly masculine and white...despite increasing numbers of female players, hockey still makes a major contribution to discourses of Canada’s national identity that privilege native-born, white men. In its roles as national symbol and everyday pastime, hockey produces a very ordinary but pernicious sense of male entitlement: to space, to status, to national belonging [41].*

Hockey represents a hypermasculine realm through its integration and celebration of violence: checking and fighting are integral to the game. Its emphasis on work ethic and physical and mental toughness gives the game a working-class credibility in spite of the multi-million dollar salaries of many NHL players. While ideologically and practically white and male, hockey is no gentleman’s game!

### Golf

Unlike hockey, golf is both an individual and a non-contact sport. It is, indeed, first and foremost, a gentleman’s game. Golf’s legacy of upper class white maleness has been superficially disrupted by the participation of men of colour but the formal and informal rules of the game remain true to this elitist legacy. This legacy has withstood the participation of women – albeit in sex segregated contexts - because such participation in no way undermines binary notions of sex difference. As Douglas and Jamieson observe, “Because it was not perceived as undermining culturally hegemonic femininity, golf, along with tennis, has long been considered an acceptable activity for women” [42]. Douglas and Jamieson go on to point out that the elitist status of golf remains fundamentally unchanged regardless of the token participation of sex and race outsiders:

*The social networks and structures that sustain the sport continue to reflect connections and commitments that reproduce a racial identity of whiteness as the status quo and maintain class exclusivity while simultaneously advancing heterosexuality as the norm...Thus, with its enduring ties to country clubs, golf remains an elitist activity [42].*

Hockey and golf are mediated by gender, race and class in different ways although both represent and shore up white male privilege in North American culture. As a result, media coverage defends these spaces from gender incursions in different ways and my analysis will contribute to our understanding of these differences.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical approach used in this article focuses on insights from postmodern queer feminist science within a critical cultural studies framework. Postmodern queer feminist science reveals the cultural bases of sex segregated sport by demonstrating the extent to which biological 'facts' about sex and racial difference are ideological rather than essential [13]. Postmodern queer feminists challenge the essential categories of sex and gender as well as the naturalness of the gender binary and deconstruct the assumed separation of biological from cultural imperatives in explaining human difference [13-16, 43, 44]. Social forces, not essential characteristics, dictate what is given biological significance [14]. Postmodern queer feminists insist that the sex/gender binary between men and women is as much constituted by assumptions about its existence as by the existence of distinctive and natural differences between the two sexes.

Critical cultural studies of sport emphasize the symbiotic relationship between sporting institutions and sport media in constructing ideologies of sex and race difference [45]. Speaking of race, Hoberman describes sport as "racial theatre" [11]. I would extend this characterization further by describing *sport as cultural theatre*: an array of social spaces, institutions and practices that transmit images and ideas about how people should be categorized and what the hierarchical relationships within these categorization schemes ought to be. This understanding of sport as cultural theatre provides an impetus for exploring the similarities and differences between racial and sex segregation in sport as evidenced in mainstream print media. This article contributes to such scholarship by providing an historical comparative analysis of a dominant print medium's discourse on racial and sex segregation in sport.

Comparing the similarities and differences between racial and sex segregation in sport without replicating the pervasive invisibility of women of colour requires a critical feminist analysis of race and gender as overlapping. A helpful example of such work is provided by Sarah Banet-Weiser in her comparison of the construction of black masculinity in the NBA with the construction of femininity in the WNBA. She observes that while gender and race run through the media discourse about both leagues the privileging of race in the NBA and gender in the WNBA serves to reinforce white, patriarchal hegemony. Black masculinity is constructed as ill-mannered (not middle-class) and potentially criminal in contrast to white masculinity in the NBA; the WNBA is profoundly gendered in the construction of a conservative form of femininity that both polices the "bad black boys" of the NBA and reassures mainstream America that in spite of athletic abilities, women still know their place.

*With the racial and gender boundaries tightened and clarified, the safely domesticated Black male bodies can become the*

*symbols that advertisers want, and the female players emerge as appropriate role models and spokespersons for the league [6].*

While the subtexts of gender in the NBA and race in the WNBA remain powerful, it is only in the *contrast* of coverage, Banet-Weiser argues, that the racial and gender discourses at work are revealed. It is this revelatory potential surrounding the structuring roles of racism and sexism [46] that makes a comparison between racial and sex segregation in sport potentially instructive.

## MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

*The New York Times* banner claims that this newspaper contains "all the news that's fit to print." That claim may be dubious but for the purposes of my research it is a useful claim - as much as any medium can provide a snapshot of mainstream social assumptions about race and gender identities and the 'legitimate' bases of inclusion. I compare this newspaper's coverage of Jackie Robinson's integration into Major League Baseball with the coverage of the participation of four women in traditionally male-only professional sporting realms: Manon Rheame and Hayley Wickenheiser in the team sport of hockey and Annika Sorenstam and Michelle Wie in the individual sport of golf. This research provides a valuable **case study** [47] of a powerful sport medium's track record in relation to practices of race and sex-based exclusion.

I accessed online archives of *The New York Times* through two sources - *The New York Times Online* and Lexis-Nexis. I analyzed all articles - totaling thirty<sup>1</sup> - about Jackie Robinson printed from 1946 to 1948 to ensure coverage of his first two seasons in the major leagues and the fourteen articles printed during 1997 as the fifty year anniversary of the integration of major league baseball was celebrated. I selected and analyzed a total of one hundred and four *The New York Times* articles covering the participation of Rheame, Wickenheiser, Sorenstam and Wie in traditionally male sporting events from 1992 to 2005.

Manon Rheame and Hayley Wickenheiser, both Canadian women, have played trailblazing roles by playing hockey in professional men's leagues. Rheame gained notoriety - within the sporting community at least - by being the first woman to ever play in an NHL game. On September 22, 1992 she spent a period in goal for the Tampa Bay Lightning in an exhibition game. That was her first of two NHL pre-season appearances, although she continued to play in minor league games for several years after that. Hayley Wickenheiser is considered to be the best female hockey player in the world and her play in several Olympic contests has been dominant. Annika Sorenstam - one of the most dominant golfers on the Ladies' Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Tour ever - received a sponsor's exemption to compete in the 2003 Colonial Professional Golf Association tournament. Sorenstam was the first woman since Babe Didrikson Zaharias to do so. Didrikson Zaharias competed twice - in the 1938 and 1945 Los Angeles Opens - but this was prior to the establishment of the LPGA [19].

<sup>1</sup> to the best of my knowledge given that access was through online databases

Coverage of Sorenstam was ten times that of the other three women athletes I focus on in this article combined. Coming into the international golfing spotlight at the age of 13, Michelle Wie has shocked and excited the sport because of her level of play at such a young age. Her determination to play both LPGA and PGA events has both angered - Nancy Lopez's recent comments to reporters that Wie should learn to win at the LPGA level rather than participating in PGA events are a case in point - and inspired her peers and media commentators. By the age of 16, Wie had attempted to make the cut in eight PGA events and made the cut in one. While her performance has rarely been stellar when compared with elite male players, she has consistently outperformed many of her male competitors.

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

I used textual analysis to reveal the raced and gendered nature of *The New York Times* coverage of these athletes. Drawing on Lumpkin and Williams [48] and Vincent [36]. I began by underlining all stereotypical and/or racist/sexist descriptors of Jackie Robinson and the four crossover athletes in headlines and within the text of articles. I used these selections to develop categories and themes as a basis for discourse analysis that led to the emergence of contextual meanings [49]. My theoretical framework - postmodern feminist science within a critical cultural studies framework - required that themes relating to claims of biological sex difference, binary based sex stereotypes, and racial markers - present or absent [49] - be given particular attention.

A critical reading of these articles revealed important ways in which *The New York Times* constructed notions of race and gender as they relate to binary categories of inclusion and exclusion. I begin by summarizing the coverage of Jackie Robinson, then that of crossover athletes, followed by an analysis of the similarities and differences in coverage relating to racial and sex segregation.

## RESULTS: JACKIE ROBINSON

Jackie Robinson was signed to the Montreal Royals - a farm team of the Major League Baseball Brooklyn Dodgers franchise - in 1946. In 1947 he was called up to "the show" itself, signing with MLB's Dodgers. A number of themes emerged in the coverage of Jackie Robinson's initial participation in Major League Baseball, the most significant three being: the importance of winning; segregation as discrimination and hence social injustice; and Jackie's dignified acceptance of his role as representative of the "Negro race" (sic).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WINNING

The most important assumption threaded throughout the coverage of Jackie Robinson's first two years in Major League Baseball was the importance of winning. Branch Rickey, President of the Dodgers, dismissed race as an important factor in choosing players for his organization, stating

*I did not sign these two boys (Robinson and William Wight)...because of any political*

*pressure. I signed them because of my interest in winning a pennant. If an elephant could play center field better than any man I would play the elephant [4].*

## RACIAL SEGREGATION AS DISCRIMINATION

While coverage acknowledged racism as a social problem, documentation of the "spring training ritual" whereby players of colour had to stay at different hotels (or board in private homes) and eat at different restaurants (if available) than their white team-mates [50] was mostly uncritical. Segregation was identified as discrimination - when the topic was playing fields in cities that would not allow black and white players to play together - but separate quarters for black athletes were reported more matter of factly. In identifying racism as a social problem emphasis was consistently placed on the notion of common humanity across the colour line; occasionally *The New York Times* coverage even advocated the role of sport in helping to end segregation [51]. Racial integration, at least on the playing field, one article reported, and no coverage disputed, was inevitable. Articles addressed protests by the KKK and concerns that attendance would fall with consistently favourable attitudes about racial integration.

## JACKIE ROBINSON AS REPRESENTATIVE OF THE "NEGRO RACE" (SIC)

As an individual, Jackie Robinson was praised for his outstanding athletic ability (he would indeed go on to win the Most Valuable Player award in the 1949 season) and his "Christ-like...credit-to-his race" comportment [52]:

*He was modest where he might have been assertive. He was diplomatic where he might have been defiant. He met outright injustice under which he had to control his temper and he shrugged off the inconvenience of petty prejudice with a grin [51].*

Jackie Robinson's acceptance of his role as "representative of the negro race" was part of the abnormal pressure he faced and this was highlighted in coverage: his play on the field was under a microscope and he received written death threats [53]. In the end his athletic ability negated concerns that Negroes (sic) were not good enough to play in the Major Leagues.

Other themes addressed included the promotional value of integration, from an MLB business perspective, and territorial conflicts with Negro League teams. The promotional value of integration was emphasized in noting the huge increase in attendance sparked by the participation of Jackie Robinson and the other black ballplayers that followed. Territorial conflicts were addressed in terms of the impact of the integration of Major League Baseball on the Negro Leagues: attendance diminished immediately upon integration [54] and the ultimate result was the disintegration of the Negro Leagues.

*The New York Times* coverage of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the integration of Major League Baseball and the celebration of Jackie Robinson as a trailblazer in that cause supports

Hoberman's claim that white fandom of black athletes reduces racism to a past injustice that has been resolved [11]. The emphasis on the bravery and personal excellence of Jackie Robinson as a representative of his race is consistent with what Birrell and Cole refer to as the American liberal tradition that sees an individual "as the central character within a drama of heroic confrontation between an individual" and the powers that be [55]. The institutional effects of racism as a social force that continue to effect athletes and non-athletes of colour go unmentioned and unchallenged. Every Major League Baseball player currently wears a patch on his jersey with Jackie Robinson's number on it and indeed, this number has been permanently retired from use in the league. At the same time, complaints about racist hiring practices for coaching and management positions, racial stacking and accusations that the media are racist are heartily dismissed as the misguided perception of troubled and disgruntled individuals. Playing the "race card" is attacked as a "cheap shot"; in short, while Jackie Robinson is celebrated as an American hero, *The New York Times* coverage of the anniversary includes no discussion of racism as an ongoing social problem.

It is interesting to compare coverage of Jackie Robinson's groundbreaking entry into MLB with that relating to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event in terms of the extent to which racism and racial injustice are acknowledged. Barring men of colour from participation in MLB was and is seen as a solid incidence and signifier of racial discrimination. But the understanding of racism as an ongoing social force stops at this rather rudimentary, structural level governing participation. My analysis of *The New York Times* coverage of women "crossover athletes" is more discouraging in this sense. Not only does such coverage fail to consider the possibility that the structure of sex segregation represents gender injustice but it suggests that sexism is a thing of the past. The high-powered world of commercial sport is portrayed as fundamentally 'fair.'

## RESULTS: "CROSS-OVER ATHLETES"

A critical reading of articles relating to the participation of "cross-over athletes" reveals the ways in which *The New York Times* constructs these women as gender transgressors thereby reinforcing binary categories of inclusion and exclusion. Representations of these four athletes are on the whole consistent with critical sport studies research on the role of the media in emphasizing and normalizing hegemonic femininity and the existence of fundamental biological differences between men and women [1, 23, 24]. A number of themes emerged in my analysis, the three most central being: women enter men's events as a publicity stunt; men and women are assumed to be fundamentally different athletes; and these athletes are presented as "good girls," meaning that they are not feminists and they behave themselves. I elaborate on each of these themes below.

## WOMEN ENTER MEN'S EVENTS AS A PUBLICITY STUNT

As Theberge observes, "it is generally agreed that Rheume's "success" was a publicity stunt, owing in good

measure to her appearance rather than her ability" [31]. *The New York Times* coverage of her "pioneering" moment mostly reflects this appraisal [56]. Like Rheume, Wickenheiser was initially signed by Salamat a Swedish men's team, for the sake of publicity. While playing to sellout crowds everywhere in Sweden, it was her ability on the ice that made them keep her on for the entire 2003 season [57]. And yet, unsurprisingly, an article published on March 31, 2003 emphasizes her appearance in a way that is atypical of sports reporting on male athletes:

*Wearing sweats and clutching a Discman at the rink's café, Ms. Wickenheiser looks like a rugged version of the actress Julianne Moore, all cheekbones and eyes. She prefers her reddish hair short, the easier to tuck it under her helmet [58].*

The media coverage surrounding Sorenstam's participation in the Colonial was so intense it would merit a study of its own. She was on-camera constantly from the moment she arrived at the course until the moment she left – a level of media attention that went beyond even the intensity of coverage devoted to Tiger Woods. *The New York Times* coverage included a focus on the unprecedented publicity garnered for the event that resulted from having Sorenstam play.

The anger that Michelle Wie's participation in PGA events has garnered is grounded in the assumption that she is receiving sponsor's exemptions only for the sake of publicity for the event. Indeed, there is no question that both Sorenstam and Wie's participation in PGA events has brought unprecedented publicity for the tour sponsors. No evidence is provided, however, to demonstrate that publicity is a motivation for the athletes themselves; indeed, the intense scrutiny appears to be a handicap.

## MEN AND WOMEN ARE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT ATHLETES

Even coverage supportive of the participation of women in traditionally male sporting arenas tends to reinforce assumptions about women being the "weaker sex" in need of male protection and that they are limited to athletic roles that require skill rather than muscle power. In writing about the knuckle ball, for example – a peculiarly effective non-power pitch in baseball - George Vecsey writes that

*Anybody with an ounce of spunk could watch the tube Friday and think, "Hmmm, I could do that." Female athletes, emboldened by the presence of Manon Rheume, the goalkeeper in the Tampa Bay hockey organization, could see themselves lobbing a knuckler past the Braves [59].*

Robert Lipsyte's September 25, 1992 article, "Is Enlightened Ice Age Ushering in the 90's" praises hockey as "the Only True Sport...secure enough in its manhood to let a woman play." He then goes on to contradict himself by asking "Can you imagine what Adam Graves would do to any opposing player who hit a female teammate of his?" [60] While acknowledging Wickenheiser's skill and initial success in the Swedish league, an article states that she has

had to adjust her game to play with the men – relying more on skill and finesse given that she is physically outmatched:

*...she is routinely hurled into the boards and body checked by men far larger than her 170-pound, 5-foot-9-inch frame [58].*

And yet an article published on February 25, 2003 informs the reader that Wickenheiser is about average size for players in the European league [57].

Wickenheiser's first assist and first goal in the league are featured in stories about her [57]– stories that would never have been written if she were playing in a women's amateur league in Edmonton, Alberta rather than competing with and against men in a Swedish league that normally receives no coverage whatsoever in North American news outlets. But Wickenheiser is also quoted as saying that she is one of very few women capable of playing with men and that she is doubtful a woman could play in the NHL, stating that "They are so big, strong and fast, you would get injured over 80 games" [58]. Indeed, the NHL is a dangerous game – as indicated by the constant and frequently career-ending injury reports for numerous male players – but the danger is emphasized as a justification for excluding women. Women are assumed to have skills that may occasionally give them a legitimate role in male sporting arenas but the ability to defend themselves against the violence that is integral to certain sports – in this case hockey - is not part of this skill set.

One of the most interesting dynamics in media coverage of Sorenstam's participation in the Colonial concerns the attention given to PGA Tour member Vijay Singh's opposition to it. While a number of tour members expressed opposition, the subtext of race is powerful in the way in which Singh is singled out for vilification.

*"I hope she misses the cut," Singh was quoted as saying by The Associated Press. "Why? Because she doesn't belong out here. If I'm drawn with her, which I won't be, I won't play. What is she going to prove by playing? It's ridiculous" [61].*

Nick Price, a former Colonial champion, and several other white tour members stated opposition to Sorenstam's participation, but only Singh's race was explicitly referenced as he was disproportionately targeted for his sexist stance. Tiger Woods, another man of colour, urged Sorenstam to commit to playing in more than one PGA event, expressing concern about Sorenstam's participation in terms of the impact on the legitimacy of the LPGA. He was concerned that if she played poorly in one tournament, it would be a setback for women's golf. Unlike Singh, however, Woods' race was not explicitly referenced in *The New York Times'* coverage of Sorenstam's participation in the Colonial, nor were his remarks delegitimized by repeated journalistic derision.

*Singh, a 40-year-old native of Fiji, is mild-mannered and normally low-key. In the early 1990s, when some in golf tried to use the dark-skinned, broad-shouldered Singh to temper the sport's segregated, country club image, he simply let his golf do the talking.*

*Yet Singh, who is ranked No. 7 in the world, held nothing back in an interview with the A.P. as he left the locker room at Quail Hollow on Sunday... "She's the best woman golfer in the world, and I want to emphasize 'woman,'" Singh said of Sorenstam. "we have our tour for men, and they have their tour" [61].*

Singh clarified his statement that he hoped she missed the cut by subsequently saying: "I hope she misses the cut because I don't want to have a woman beat me" [62]. In its focus on Singh's objection to Sorenstam's participation, *The New York Times* quoted David Feherty, an analyst working for both CBS and USA, as stating that

*"I'm incensed by these guys," he said. "There are so few willing to be gentlemen about this. Here we have a woman willing to have a go at this, and the last athlete to deliberately put himself in this focus was Jesse Owens. She doesn't have to prove anything to me. She's the best woman ever to have played. To have the guts to play the men and to endure this mean-spirited stuff, God Almighty, it's petty stuff." He compared the attitude of Singh and some others to a girl stealing a boy's tricycle and pedaling away with it. "The bottom line of ladies and gentleman has been lost with this militant man versus woman thing. I never would have sided with Vijay. This is all about an athlete trying to find out how good she can be. If Tiger needed another place for a challenge, he would try it" [63].*

The comparison of Sorenstam with Jesse Owens, an African American whose athletic performance at the 1936 Olympics was instrumental in undermining racist notions of Black athletic inferiority, is interestingly juxtaposed with the assertion that golf is a "gentleman's game" and the unspoken assumption that Sorenstam should be welcomed on the tour and "treated like a lady." There is a suggestion underlying *The New York Times* coverage that there is a gentlemanly (white or "good black") way of maintaining the masculinity of golf by including women as tokens.

Clear gender differences in terms of ability were assumed in coverage by *The New York Times* and seemingly by Sorenstam herself. A notable exception is the commentary by Phil Mickelson included in an article published on May 16, 2003:

*"The PGA Tour, in my mind, has never been the men's PGA Tour," Mickelson said. "It has been the tour of the best players in the world, regardless of race and regardless of gender. If there is a female who is good enough to compete out here, I've got no problem with her doing it. I think she should do it. There is a lot more money out here than there is on the LPGA, and I think if she wants to do really well she should come out and play" [64].*

This vision of the PGA as a potentially non-segregated sporting space was not expressed in any other coverage. Instead, repeated emphasis was placed on the nature of this particular golf course as not rewarding male advantage in terms of power. The Colonial, it was said repeatedly, was the right course for Sorenstam to play on because it is not a typical men's course in that it does not overly reward power. Sorenstam as a woman, therefore, would not be genetically disadvantaged in this venue. According to *The New York Times*, "Sorenstam knows she doesn't have the same power as most PGA Tour players off the tee and with longer irons" [65]. The message was clear that there are courses that would be unsuitable for women to play on – they simply cannot drive the ball far enough. Ironically, however, it was Sorenstam's short game (skill in chipping and putting) that failed her as she fell victim to nerves rather than her long game (power in driving the ball): "When she played on the PGA Tour at Colonial Country Club in 2003, Sorenstam's knees buckled after she split the fairway on her opening drive. She said she could not breathe" [66]. Without the intense media pressure on her as a "first woman," who knows what she might have accomplished; or how she might fare if she competed in a number of PGA tour events. Sorenstam's decision to forego further PGA tournaments means that we will never know this.

Like Sorenstam, but more surprisingly given the invisibility of whiteness as a racial category [42], Wie's race is unmarked. It is possible that this reflects Hanson's (2005) claim that Asian-ness is given very little attention in the discourse of race and sport. After all, I cannot imagine that a woman of African descent doing what Wie is doing in professional golf would be racially unmarked in media discourse [42]. Instead of race or even gender, it is Wie's age that, at least officially, garners the most explicit attention and concern.

Neither her race - she is ethnic South Korean - nor her gender are explicitly addressed in *The New York Times* coverage of Wie's attempt to make the cut at the Sony Open in 2004. Instead, it is her age – she was 14 at the time - that provides a basis for questioning her inclusion. A number of tour members wonder if it's "good for her" to be playing in tournaments that she "can't win." The by now notorious Vijay Singh, his overt sexism disciplined out of him by the media barrage that followed his remarks in opposition to Sorenstam's participation in the Colonial, addresses Wie's participation in terms of appropriate player (child) development.

*"You know, I don't know, I wish her all the best," Singh said. "If it was my son, I think I'd teach him how to win. You know what I mean? You put young kids out there to learn how to win golf tournaments. For Michelle, she's going out there and she's not winning. It's always negative when you don't win. You need to win golf tournaments. She's not going to do that playing against the men" [67].*

I argue that the focus on Wie's age is a substitute for less acceptable, but widely held, views that a young, Asian woman has no business playing with men. As Douglas and Jamieson observe,

*The decision not to identify issues pertaining to race does not eliminate the ways in which social structures and cultural practices continue to marginalize and exclude racial subalterns [42].*

That Wie possesses an overdeveloped sense of entitlement in playing in both PGA and LPGA events is indeed an underlying message but one that is significantly overshadowed by intense media focus on this exotic creature (my interpretation) who is adding a special interest dimension (publicity) to the tour.

In a notable exception to the ongoing reinforcement of the gender binary and the natural basis for sex segregated sport, a feature article appeared on February 25, 2003 entitled "Female Athletes Gaining Ground and Breaking It." In this article Longman chronicles the debate concerning whether or not women can perform at the same level as men [57]. Among the athletes she mentions are the four women I focus on in this article. While she asks the question: "Will sports become significantly more integrated by gender in the next generation?" and provides data to support the possibility that women are capable of competing with men, discourse like this that challenges the naturalness of the gender binary and sex segregated sport is not integrated into "regular" coverage of women athletes participating in traditionally male sporting domains. It is always a "special" feature and the questions and insights it addresses remain outside the boundaries of 'regular' sport reporting.

### THESE ATHLETES ARE "GOOD GIRLS"

In coverage by *The New York Times* Rheaume, Wickenheiser and Sorenstam are repeatedly marked as non-feminists – as not trying to make a point on behalf of women in general. Like Wickenheiser, Rheaume and Wie, Sorenstam is portrayed as an individual athlete seeking to challenge herself rather than as a feminist seeking to advance the cause of women as a group. Sorenstam is careful to emphasize this herself and she, like the media, made a point of distancing herself from the concurrent activities of Martha Burk, a feminist activist seeking to end the men-only policy of the prestigious Augusta National golf course. Speaking in response to a question about her motivation being similar to the anti-segregation action at Augusta, Sorenstam stated that:

*"The similarity is, it's a woman playing on a men's tour, a woman member at a men's club," Sorenstam said. "But for me, personally, this is a coincidence it happened this year. I'm not looking at the Colonial or trying to play in a PGA event to do something like Martha Burk is doing. This is for me. I want to see how good I am" [68].*

Sorenstam's self-image as not "a crusader, but as a champion seeking the ultimate challenge" [65] was reported repeatedly.

Rheaume, Wickenheiser, Sorenstam and Wie receive explicit praise for being "nice girls" in dealing with opposition to their participation and with the intense pressure and media attention their participation elicits. Wickenheiser is lauded for her uncomplaining stance with regard to the



sexism she experiences as a hockey player. *The New York Times* notes that fitting in with her Salamat team-mates was difficult for her. A disadvantage Wickenheiser faced in terms of team chemistry was that she had her own changing area and was not welcome in the team dressing room, a crucial arena for bonding. Still, apparently her team-mates, who have been “won over by her skill on the ice – adore her” [58]. She is reported as being aware that many of her opponents dread her success and may try to hurt her and she has learned to keep her head up to protect herself [58]. Her purpose in playing against men is to improve as a hockey player, not to “make a point...” She recognizes the need for diplomacy, saying “You can’t rush things.... You can’t push” [58]. Coverage of Wickenheiser acknowledged her talent and her character in facing opposition –most recently from Salamat team-mates and opponents in the league and the president of the International Hockey Federation but throughout her childhood and youth as well. Wickenheiser is quoted as saying “I developed thick skin because I constantly dealt with people saying that girls shouldn’t play hockey” [58].

Sorenstam impressed *The New York Times* reporters with her comportment during her play at the Colonial. In spite of a very successful first round where she looked like she might make it, Sorenstam ultimately did not make the cut. But she inspired a media frenzy of applause for her demeanor. For weeks after the Colonial media sources waxed on and on about her comportment. She was greatly admired for having a good cry at the post-tournament news conference and expressing gratitude for the value of the experience itself.

*Many came to adore and respect Annika Sorenstam once they witnessed her touching human side when she competed on the PGA Tour at the Colonial in 2003. She didn’t make the cut, but she earned a flock of fans who have stuck with her ever since [3].*

Wie missed the cut by one stroke in her first attempt at a PGA event. She recently made the cut for the first time in eight tries – at the SK Open, making her the first woman since 1945 to do so. She finished tied for 34<sup>th</sup> place. Wie’s maturity and composure in the face of intense scrutiny and pressure – her refusal to behave like a stereotypically emotional teenage girl – is extensively remarked upon.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

I summarize my analysis of *The New York Times* coverage in terms of:

- similarities and differences between coverage of Jackie Robinson’s pioneering play in MLB and that of women crossover athletes;
- challenges (if any) to the naturalness of the gender binary that parallel challenges to the naturalness of racial difference;
- indications that sex segregation is viewed as either based in natural differences or as coercive and discriminatory and hence an injustice similar to racial segregation.

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

There are two similarities in the coverage of Jackie Robinson and the women crossover athletes showcased in this article: the intense media scrutiny they all experience and, in the case of Wickenheiser, Sorenstam and Robinson, the emphasis and praise by *The New York Times* coverage for their dignified comportment while challenging exclusionary practices. But the similarities in media coverage end there. The most obvious difference is that the biological line between men and women - unlike the notion of a common humanity in opposition to racist assumptions about biological difference advanced in the coverage of Jackie Robinson - remains unchallenged. And while Robinson is both acknowledged and praised for representing the ‘negro race,’ coverage of Rheume, Wickenheiser and Sorenstam emphasizes their ‘individual quest’ over any feminist allegiance. While racial integration is considered inevitable, coverage of these women crossover athletes serves to reinforce the appropriateness, at least for most women, of playing in sex segregated sporting arenas.

## IS SEGREGATION, SEGREGATION?

Are assumptions about fundamental biological differences between the races and the sexes treated in similar or different ways? How does this effect discourse on segregated sporting spaces and social justice? *The New York Times* coverage of MLB’s integration *via* the inclusion of Jackie Robinson acknowledges racism as a social problem and challenges biological assumptions about racial difference. However, while sexism is occasionally acknowledged as a social problem there is no contestation of the logic or structure of the gender binary. Instead, the binary is reinforced by *The New York Times* in its coverage of the four women crossover athletes. This is accomplished through the advancement of the following themes:

- Assumption of men’s superior strength
- Women enter men’s events as a publicity stunt
- Women in men’s events are a novelty or a joke
- Women enter men’s events because they want the big money not offered in women’s sports
- Women need to compete against men to legitimize themselves as athletes
- The only way for women athletes to get publicity is to play *against* men
- Women just want to test their limits and they need to play against men to do so
- Women do not espouse feminist beliefs; they refuse to accept roles as representative of women in general; these athletes are not trying to make a point about sex segregation or gender injustice.

Coverage of women athletes participating in traditionally male sporting arenas emphasizes their exceptionality in the way of that faulty logic that claims “the exception proves the rule,” in this case, of the naturalness of the gender binary and its role in justifying sex segregated sport. This coverage serves to render the gender continuum invisible. The pressure on men to ensure that a woman does not beat them

is "reported" and reinforced by *The New York Times*. While the intense media scrutiny is acknowledged to have a deleterious effect in the case of Sorenstam, coverage by *The New York Times* does not question the disproportionate attention that the participation of a woman in a PGA event warrants. However well-behaved she is, such a woman is constructed by this medium in particular and sports media in general as a transgressor. The gender binary - the normative basis of and justification for sex segregated sport - is firmly reinforced. "Crossover athletes" - a term coined within the pages of *The New York Times* [3] to describe women competing in traditionally male sporting arenas that reifies the existence of a gender boundary - however well-received, remain interlopers and transgressors. The acknowledgement of Robinson's exceptional talent and ability to prove that he, and other minority men, belonged in the highest echelons of professional sport is unparalleled in the coverage of Rheume, Wickenheiser, Sorenstam and Wie as women interlopers. The overall structure of sex segregated sport is never called out as discrimination or criticized as systemic social injustice in the way that racial segregation was (and is).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The assumption that men and women are fundamentally different people and hence fundamentally different athletes underlies *The New York Times* treatment of these women as exceptional and serves to reinforce stereotypical assumptions of female athletic inferiority. The marginalization of these athletes as exceptional individuals rather than as representatives of women as a group is a powerful mechanism for reinforcing the status quo. As de Beauvoir observed, women are dispersed throughout the population, unlike members of other minorities, and therefore find it more difficult to organize for equality and inclusion [69]. The de-emphasis on group identity (anti-feminism) showcased in *The New York Times'* coverage is highly significant in this regard. Without the women's movement, there would be no Title IX and yet the athletes in this sample eschew feminism while challenging the gender bar as individuals. *The New York Times'* emphasis on the exceptional talent and gracious deportment of these athletes is consistent with what Birrell and Cole refer to as an American liberal tradition of portraying someone whose behaviour transgresses social norms "as the central character within a drama of heroic confrontation between an individual" and the powers that be [55]. The focus on individual rights takes attention away from structural forces of inequality. This conceptual mechanism operates in *The New York Times* to protect the institution of sex segregated sport and the gender binary from examination and challenge. Interestingly, the celebration of Jackie Robinson fifty years later as a heroic individual/symbol of racism's elimination similarly serves to render invisible ongoing racial inequality and de-legitimate charges of racist discrimination in the sport world and beyond.

Why does North American sport support at least formal racial integration while enforcing sex segregation? In her discussion of the O.J. Simpson trial, Patton observes that unlike the link between a broad system of racism and injustices against African Americans, "the link between a

broad system of sexism and a general hatred of women (commonly called "misogyny") is not recognized" [9]. By this she means that there are accepted signs of racism in American society but the mere existence of sexism is constantly being disputed. The fiftieth anniversary celebrations of Jackie Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball, while failing to address ongoing racism in professional sport and society more broadly, make it clear that racial segregation in sport is understood as *racism in action* whereas sex segregation in sport is deemed natural and indeed, biologically determined. Viewing sport as cultural theatre allows us to see how this array of institutions excludes women *as women* to maintain a patriarchal gender order and includes minority men *as men* in a sexist and racist way that perpetuates myths about racial hierarchy. The role of sport in celebrating masculinity and normalizing gender inequality by emphasizing difference and excluding women is not compromised by including men of colour; the celebration of black physicality and brutishness in contrast to the intelligence and work ethic of white athletes as a means to normalizing racial hierarchy is better accomplished by including than excluding men of colour.

While racism and sexism in North America have sufficiently different histories to be incommensurate [9], the interplay of gender and racial categories - particularly in the coverage of Vijay Singh's opposition to Sorenstam's participation in the PGA - communicates powerful messages about their structuring roles [6]. The task engaged in by a number of journalists in response to Singh's opposition to Sorenstam's participation sends the message that overt sexism directed at a white woman by a man of colour is not permissible; he should be grateful for *his* inclusion and is therefore in no position to champion the *exclusion* of others; Singh's entitlement within the elite white male sporting world of golf is limited to participation alone. While inclusion in hegemonic masculine spaces is granted to men of colour *as men*, this inclusion is limited to participation. The power to control these spaces, to decide on the criteria for inclusion and exclusion, remains a white, male privilege [39]. The historical American hysteria surrounding interactions between black men and white women [9] plays out in this context. A black man wielding authority over a white woman - in this case the authority to exclude Sorenstam from the PGA tour - is culturally unpalatable and *The New York Times* reinforces this message. While (male) gender trumps (white) race in barring admission to traditionally male sporting arenas, race retains greater cultural power in mediating relations between men of colour and white women. Vijay Singh is "taught his place" by sports journalists writing for *The New York Times*.

Sex segregation in sport only makes sense if you assume the naturalness of the gender binary and its correspondence to a two sex system. Mainstream media reflects and reinforces this assumption by obscuring evidence of performance overlaps among men and women that more accurately reflect a gender continuum [29]. The case study of coverage of crossover athletes by *The New York Times* that I present here supports this contention. All the news that's "fit to print" upholds taken for granted assumptions about essential sex difference and the naturalness of the sex segregated structure of sport that normalizes and celebrates this difference. My analysis of coverage relating to cross-

over athletes by *The New York Times* - arguably the foremost newspaper medium in North America [70] - is illuminating in this regard.

A colleague of mine argues that in certain sports the significance of gender may fall by the wayside in light of incendiary performances by women. If Michelle Wie, for example, starts winning on the PGA tour, he argues that she will be bigger than Tiger Woods and her gender (and presumably her race as well) will be eclipsed by the colour of money. Perhaps the coverage surrounding Michelle Wie is instructive in that both gender and race, while obvious and powerful subtexts, receive little attention. Douglas and Jamieson note that the post-civil rights rhetoric around race is "colourblindness" in which the refusal to acknowledge race is seen as evidence of anti-racism [42]. That this failure eclipses the ongoing salience of race as a meaningful social category is part of its appeal. That genderblindness may follow suit in sporting contexts that allow for inclusion without challenging the patriarchal heterosexist gender order upheld by sex segregated sport in general is a possibility. Golf may be a sport that, in spite of arguments about the power advantage held by men, can be integrated without any challenges to the gender binary being acknowledged. Wie drives the ball as far as many of the men on the tour do and there is no telling how successful she can be. In the more hyper masculine context of hockey, however, the threat to the gender order must be contained. Perhaps treating exceptional women athletes "like ladies" is possible on the golf course without disrupting a gender order that is more powerfully dramatized in team sports that involve territorial physical combat. In these sports there can be no way to integrate women without challenging the fundamental ideology of the gender binary and sex difference; unlike the way in which racism has been reinvented within a dynamic of athletic inclusion, the divide between "men" and "women" has yet to be reconfigured in such a way as to allow women to ever be on top.

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