



Fair Play? The Triumphs and Challenges of Female Athletes in the U.S.

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media
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Executive Summary

For this report, female athletes—high school, college, and professional/semi-professional—were asked about their experiences as athletes, to gain an understanding of the challenges they face and to identify opportunities to intervene to create gender equity in athletics.

Key findings from the survey:

1

Female Professional Athletes Face Many Challenges

The higher the level of play, the more reported challenges faced by female athletes.

4

Female Athletes Inspire

86% of female athletes in high school and college are inspired/excited when they see a female athlete in advertising.

2

Female Athletes Want To Be Treated the Same As Male Athletes

The majority of female athletes (at all levels) say that they experience more hardships/challenges than male athletes—58% of high school athletes, 73% of college athletes, and 93% of professional/semi-pro female athletes.

5

Female Athletes Are Leaders

High school and college athletes describe female athletes as “hard-working” (63%), “role models” (56%), “passionate” (55%), and “confident” (55%). Professional athletes describe female athletes as “competitive” (92%), “confident” (92%), “role models” (92%), “leaders” (90%), and “determined” (90%).

3

Female Athletes Are Role Models

55% of female athletes in high school and college said that they were inspired by male athletes, but 75% said that they were inspired by female athletes.

6

Female Athletes Need Support

Nearly all respondents agreed that male athletes, athletic brands, and sports leagues have a responsibility to elevate the visibility of female athletes.



Introduction

The benefits of sports to girls and women has been well-established. Playing sports improves girls' physical health, mental health, and their performance at school and work:

Physical Health

When it comes to physical health, female athletes at all grade levels are more likely to describe their health as "excellent" than girls who do not play sports.¹ Involvement in sports leads to higher body esteem, healthier menstruation, stronger bones, and better overall health later in life.² Furthermore, female athletes are less likely than non-athletes to use illicit drugs³ and have unplanned pregnancies than non-athletes.⁴

Mental Health

Playing sports also has many positive mental health outcomes for girls and women. Female student athletes have higher self-esteem, a better self-image, and more confidence than non-athletes.⁵ Girls who play sports also

have more extensive social networks than girls who do not.⁶ Female athletes are also less likely to suffer from depression and the risk of suicide than non-athletes.⁷

School and Work

Sports also prepare girls to succeed academically in high school, and professionally once they graduate. Female student athletes are better at organizing and budgeting their time, earn higher grades,⁸ and have a lower drop-out rate than non-athletes.⁹ Sports also enhance girls' leadership skills and self-discipline, which are important for professional success in the workplace. Eight-in-ten women executives played organized sports after elementary school, and nine-in-ten women executives say sports helped them to be more disciplined later in life.¹⁰

Athletic Funding and Opportunity for Girls and Women

While athletics and opportunities to play are important to the success and development of girls and women, funding and support for female athletes fall well below funding and support for male athletes. Under-funding helps explain why women have fewer opportunities to

compete and/or play. According to a 2015 study from the National Women's Law Center, athletic opportunities for girls still lag far behind opportunities for boys, especially for girls and young women of color.¹¹ According to this report, schools are providing 1.3 million more chances for boys to play sports than girls at the high school level.¹² However, girls' participation in sports has improved considerably since Title IX mandated equality in 1972, when just 7.4% of high school-aged athletes were girls.¹³ From 2018-2019, nearly 3.5 million high school girls participated in a high school sport, compared to around 4.5 million boys, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.¹⁴ Presently, high school girls make up around 43% of all high school athletes, a vast improvement since 1972 when they were less than 10%.

How can athletes, coaches, leagues, teams, and caregivers continue to improve girls' and women's opportunities to participate in sports and athletics? The findings from this survey will aid in understanding the experiences of female athletes, so barriers to participation can be eliminated, and gender inequalities can be dismantled.

Study Methodology

To get a sense of the prevalence and perception of gender bias and the ways it surfaces at different levels of play, current high school and college athletes, as well as current or former professional or semi-professional athletes completed a survey that asked respondents about their experiences as athletes. They were also asked about their role models and the impact of sports and athletics on other areas of their lives. The survey was fielded from April 16 through May 19, 2020. Recruitment for this study relied on snowball sampling, with 494 female athletes in the U.S. completing the survey—233 current high school athletes, 198 current college athletes, and 63 current or former professional or semi-professional athletes.

Survey Findings

Findings from the survey suggest that the higher the level of play, the more female athletes reported facing challenges. Therefore, we break the analysis into two sections. The first section reviews responses from high school and college athletes, and the second section reviews responses from professional or semi-professional athletes.

High School and College Female Athletes

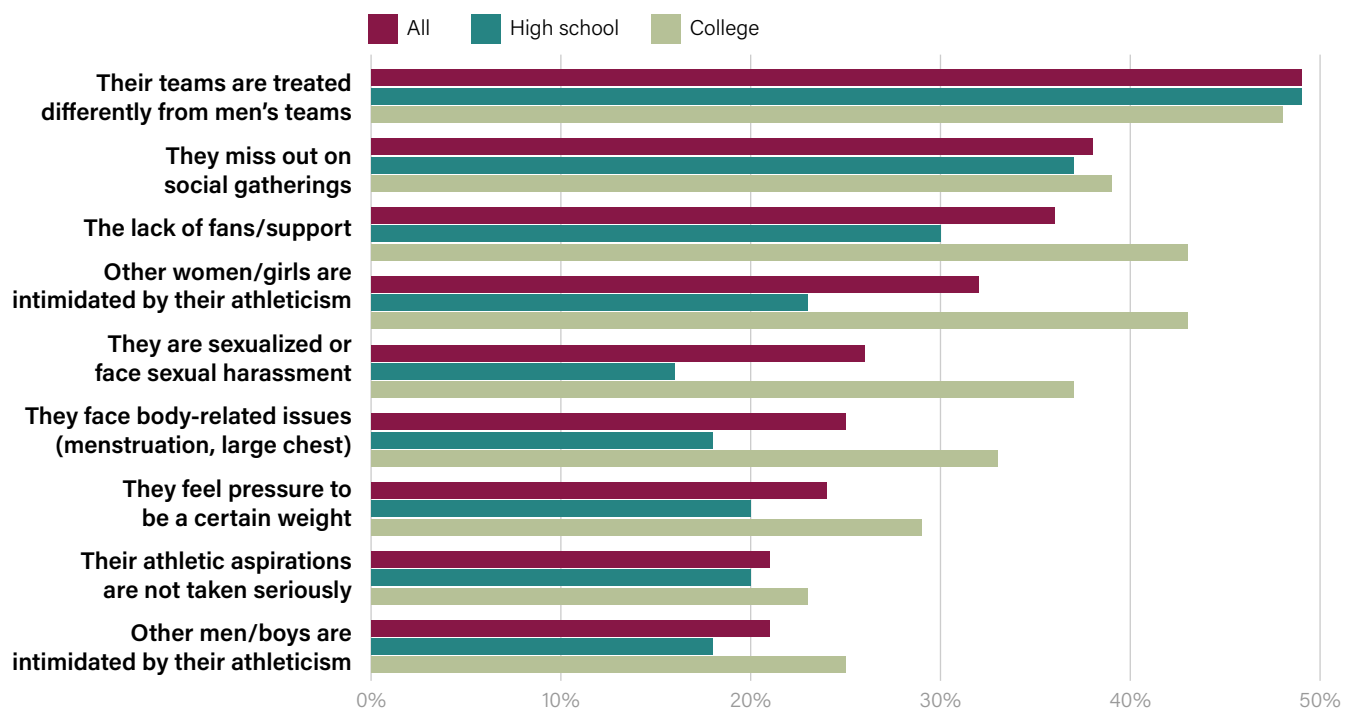
Experiences and Opportunities

The top challenges high school and college female athletes face are a combination of issues directly related to sports and their team, as well as personal and social

issues they are exposed to as athletes. As shown in Chart 1, about half of high school and college athletes express that they feel that their teams are treated differently from men's teams. This response was the most commonly selected challenge.

CHART 1.

Challenges Faced by High School and College Female Athletes



Among the 49% of college and high school athletes who that say their teams are treated differently than men’s teams, the most mentioned ways they are treated differently are:

- Men’s teams/sports are promoted more than female teams/sports (57%)
- Men’s teams have more access to funding for upkeep of facilities and fields (49%)
- Men’s teams have more access to or availability of quality equipment (47%)
- Men’s teams receive more support, such as athletic directors, doctors, trainers, and sports therapists (43%)

Other challenges high school and college athletes mentioned, shown in Chart 1, include social issues such as missing gatherings because of their athletic schedules (38%), and social difficulties because other women/girls are intimidated by their athleticism (32%), or men/boys are intimidated by their athleticism (21%). Additionally, about 1 in 4 athletes mentioned that they felt pressure to be a certain weight and also were sexualized as athletes, or have experienced sexual harassment.

Another issue raised by female athletes is the lack of female coaches and referees. Ninety percent of respondents agreed that female coaches are important because they understand female athletes’ needs and bodies. And the vast majority (83%) said that they wish there were more female referees (Chart 2).

A majority of the athletes surveyed don’t feel their aspirations are taken seriously and that there are fewer opportunities for them to pursue athletics, professionally, compared to male athletes. As shown in Chart 3, 70% of respondents agree that they think men’s athletic aspirations are taken more seriously, and 77% agree that men have more opportunities to pursue athletics, professionally.

CHART 2.

Female Athletes Want More Female Coaches and Referees in Athletics (high school and college respondents)

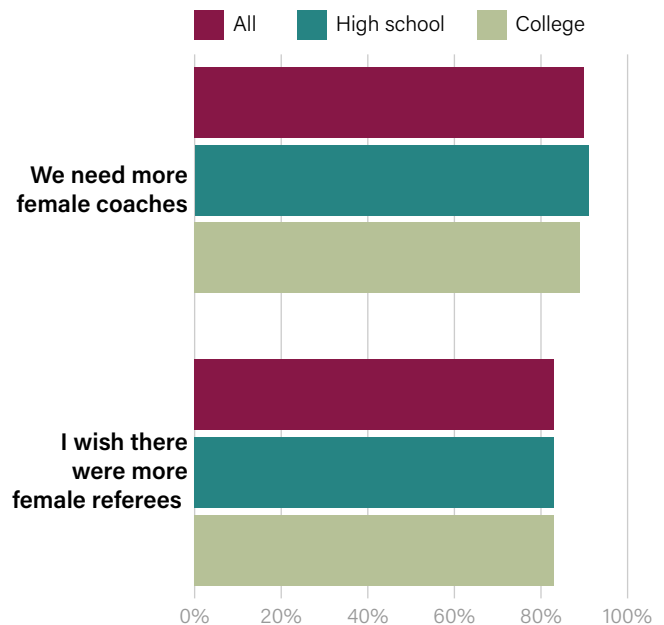
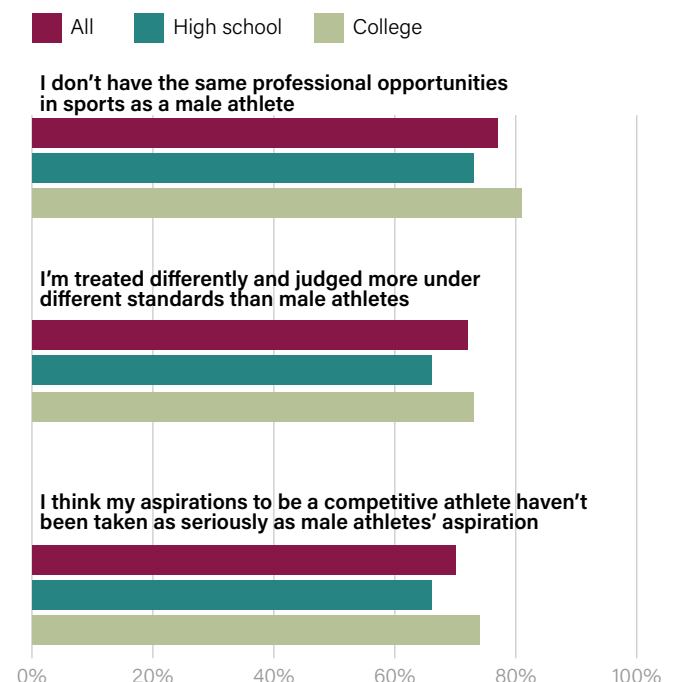


CHART 3.

Gender Bias in Access to Professional Athletic Opportunities (high school and college respondents)



The Importance of Female Role Models and Sports Marketing

Both high school and college athletes don't feel there are enough female athlete role models. Eighty-one percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "There aren't enough female athlete role models." Moreover, 87% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Growing up I wish I'd seen more female athletes." More brand sponsorships for female athletes could bridge this gap—only 52% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Female athletes are used as spokespeople and highlighted in advertising, as much as male athletes." This limitation poses an issue for the respondents surveyed, because there is a desire to see more female athletes as the face of athletic and non-athletic brands:

- 86% agreed, "We need more female athletes to be the face of athletic brands"
- 82% agreed, "We need more female athletes to be the face of non-athletic brands"

While male athletes can be role models for young girls and women, many young girls and women are looking to be inspired by someone like them who has had similar life experiences. Fifty-five percent of respondents agreed that they were inspired by male athletes, but 75% said they were inspired by female athletes (see Chart 4).

While respondents want to see more female athletes in advertising, it is important to athletes that brands not oversexualize them—79% of respondents said that female athletes are often oversexualized in advertising. Additionally, female athletes want to see more diversity in who is sponsored by brands: 88% of respondents agreed that the media only pays attention to women if they are a "mega star." But 86% of respondents agreed that they get excited when they see a female athlete in advertising, therefore more female athletes with sponsorships would be welcomed and celebrated by young female athletes.

The vast majority of high school and college athletes said that male sports and male athletes receive more media attention, promotion, and sponsorships (see Chart 5). Respondents were asked to identify whether a series of items were more common to female athletes, male athletes, or both evenly. For all of these items, shown in Chart 5, respondents perceive of male athletes to have the advantage.

CHART 4.

Male and Female Role Models in Sports (high school and college respondents)

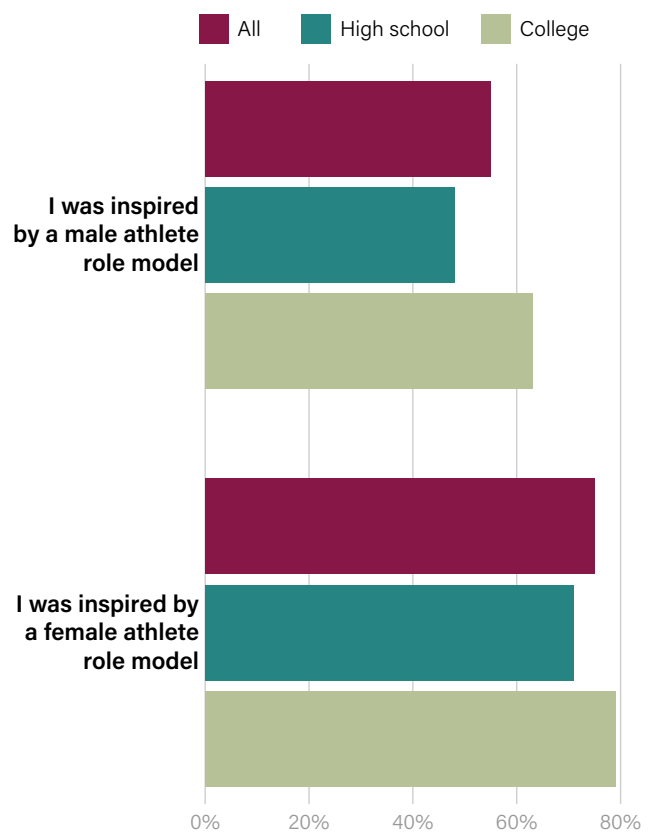
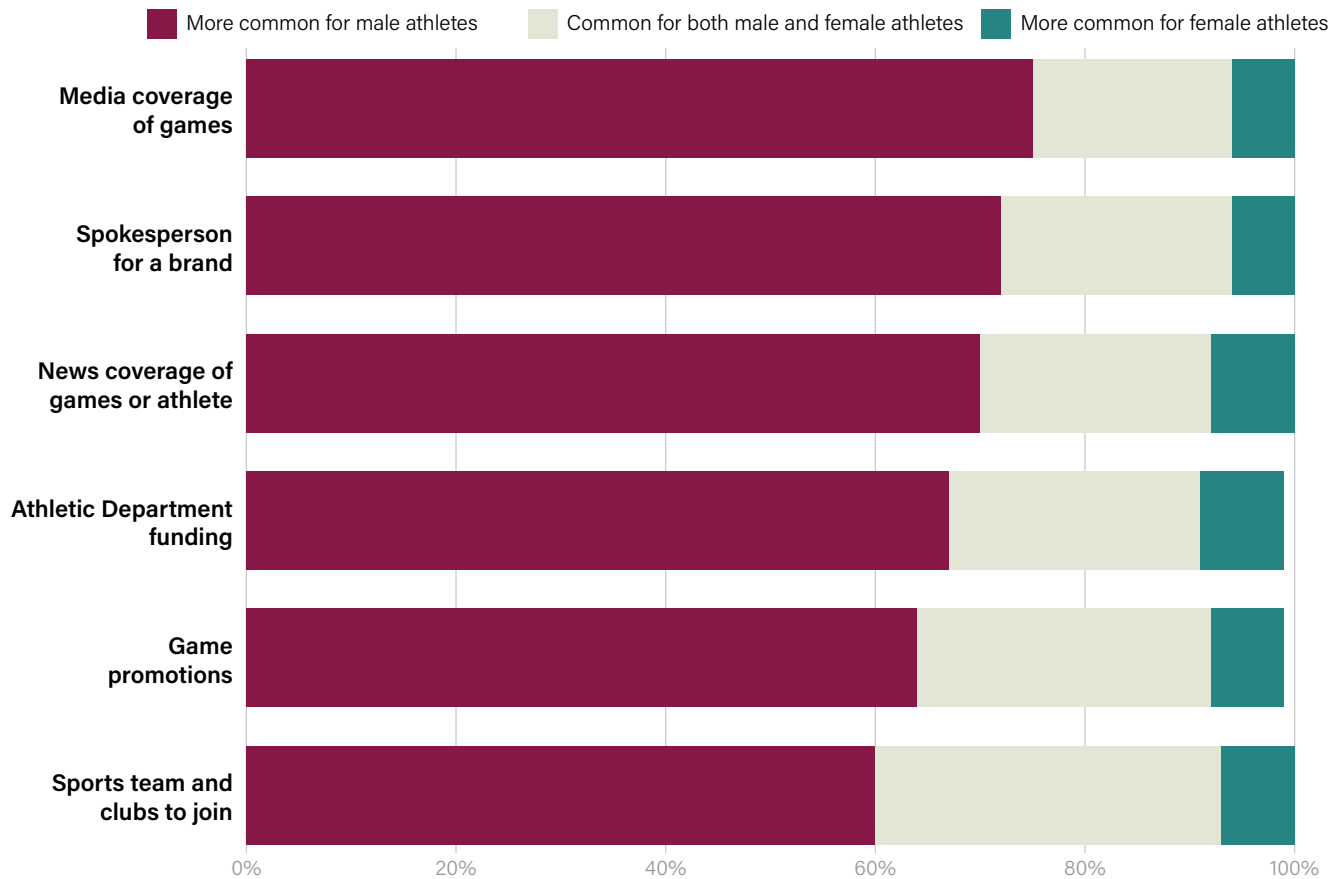


CHART 5.

Media Attention, Promotion and Sponsorships and Gender (high school and college respondents)



Gender Stereotypes and Bias

From a list of words, respondents were asked to select which was used more often to describe male athletes or female athletes (or neither). This response showcases how female athletes believe they are *perceived/described by others*. The most commonly agreed upon terms used to describe female athletes were “emotional” (70%), “sexualized” (69%), “caring” (57%), “friendly,” (49%), “patient” (46%), and their parental status (40%). The most commonly agreed upon terms used to describe male athletes were “aggressive,” “arrogant,” “ruthless,” “strong,” “the best,” and “competitive.” Most of the terms respondents identified as being used to describe female athletes are stereotypically feminine, while most of the terms used to describe male athletes are stereotypically

masculine. There is a mix of positive and negative terms mentioned for both men and women, but regardless of the tone, they are largely gender-typical (Chart 6). This finding suggests that female athletes may feel that perceptions of them are narrow and that they are boxed into existing notions of what it means to be a woman.

When asked what terms *should* be used to describe female athletes today, responses were less narrowly feminine, and more positive. Respondents noted traits that highlight their dedication to the sport, their physical strength, and their leadership traits (Chart 7). The most often mentioned terms were “hard-working” (63%), “role model” (56%), “passionate” (55%), “confident” (55%), “determined” (54%), “strong” (53%), and a “team player” (53%).

CHART 6.

Perceived Descriptors of Male and Female Athletes (high school and college respondents)

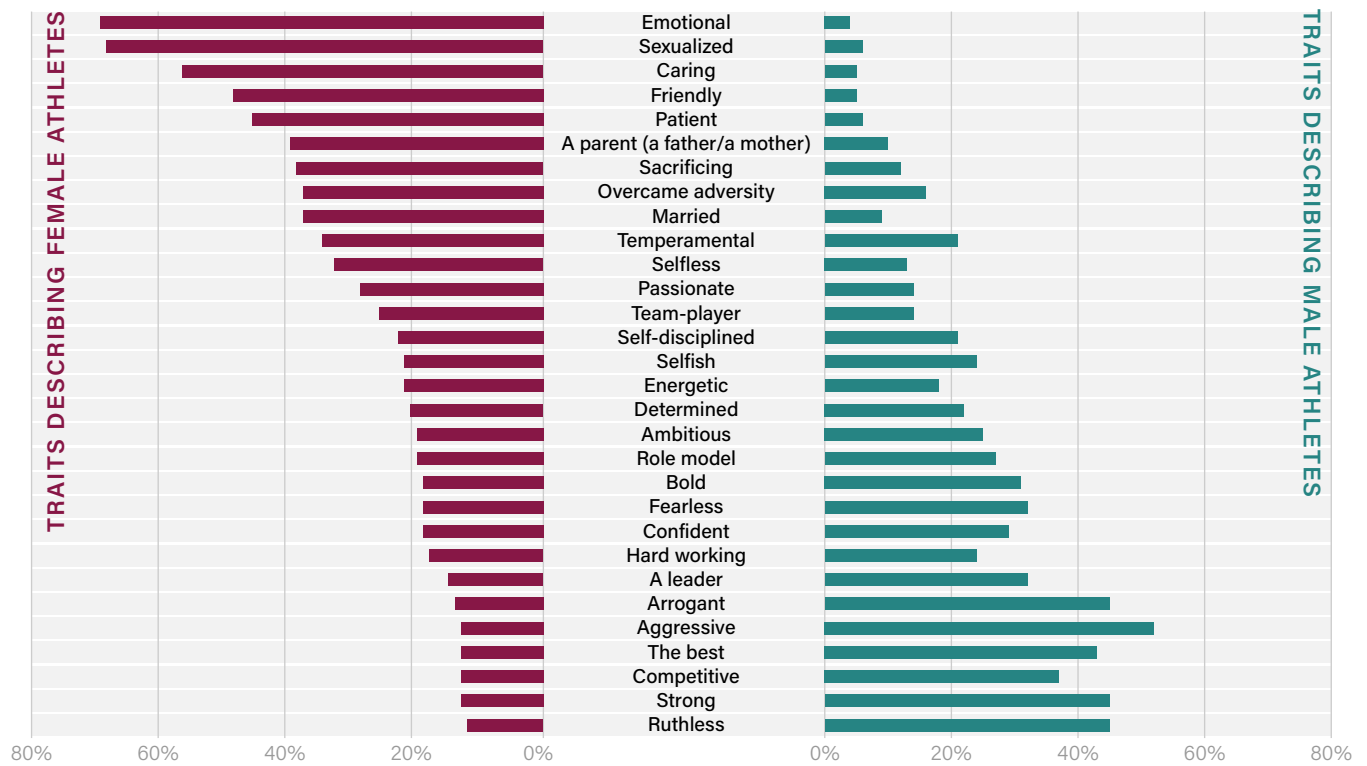
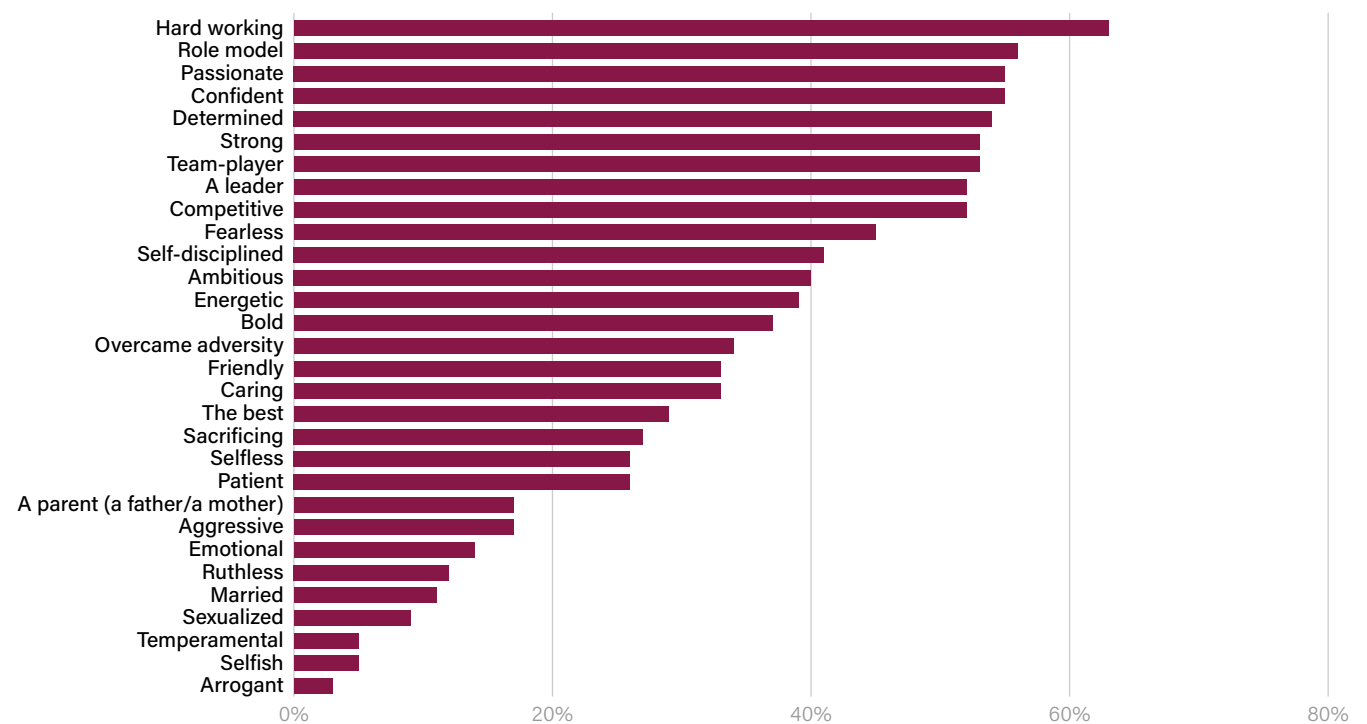


CHART 7.

Proposed Descriptors of Female Athletes (high school and college respondents)



Professional and Semi-Professional Female Athletes

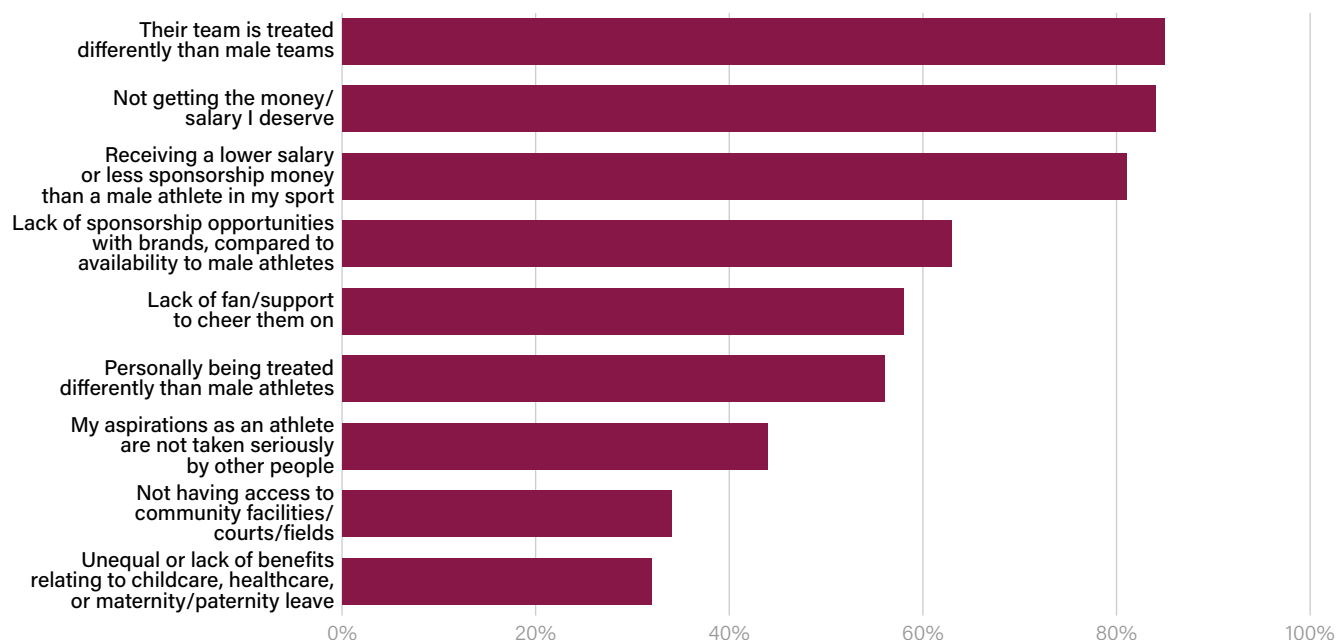
Among professional and semi-professional athletes, there is more agreement about the challenges that they face than among athletes at a lower level. The most common challenges mentioned by professional/semi-professional athletes is that their teams are treated differently than male teams (85%), and that they are not paid what they deserve (84%) (Chart 8).

Among the 85% that say their team is treated differently than male teams, the most often mentioned ways they are treated differently are:

- Males teams/sports are promoted more than female teams/sports (79%)
- Male teams have more funding for upkeep of facilities and fields (68%)

CHART 8.

Challenges Faced by Professional/Semi-Professional Female Athletes



- Men's teams receive better travel/transportation (68%)
- Male teams have more support such as athletic directors, doctors, trainers, and sports therapists (64%)
- Male teams have more quality equipment (58%)

While the professional/semi-professional athletes surveyed noted these challenges, all of them agreed with the statement, "It's great to be a female athlete right now, but there's still a lot of work to be done to improve it." To improve the experience of female professional and semi-professional athletes, the athletes surveyed noted that cooperation is needed—from male professional athletes, as well as sports brands and the leagues themselves:

- 100% agreed, "Brands have the responsibility to elevate the visibility of female athletes"
- 98% agreed, "Sports leagues have the responsibility to elevate the visibility of female athletes"
- 97% agreed, "There can be equality for women in sports, but male athletes also need to stand up and fight for it"

Professional and semi-professional athletes agree brands should be doing more to support female athletes, including:

- Sponsor more female athletic organizations (98%)
- Sponsor more female athletes (89%)
- Market female sports to both boys/men and girls/women (89%)
- Use more female athletes in ads for products unrelated to sports (e.g. clothing, health & wellness, automobiles, watches/jewelry) (88%)
- Offer equal sponsorship pay to men and women (88%)
- Make professional female athlete sport apparel/ jerseys more available (84%)

Another barrier to women's athletic careers is pay inequality. Ninety-one percent of the surveyed athletes agreed with the statement, "I'm pretty sure I get paid less than a man in my same sport." Lack of sponsorship opportunities contribute to pay inequality. Sixty-three

percent of the athletes surveyed said that they have fewer opportunities for sponsorships compared to male athletes who play their sport. But 98% also said that they believe that brands underestimate the potential economic power of female athletes.

Female athletes also mention family planning and motherhood as putting them at a disadvantage, relative to male athletes:

- 95% of respondents agreed that, "Getting pregnant and being on maternity leave puts me at a disadvantage in my sport"
- 85% of respondents agreed that, "The organizations, associations and sponsorships in place don't make it easy for a female athlete to balance motherhood and a career in sports"
- 97% of respondents agreed that, "Female athletes are more likely to have to choose between their career and a family than male athletes"
- 56% of respondents agreed that, "I have held off having children for a few years in order to further my professional athletic career"

Gender Stereotypes and Bias

From a list of words, respondents were asked to select which was used more often to describe male athletes or female athletes (or neither). The most commonly agreed upon terms used to describe female athletes were nearly identical to the terms high school and college respondents indicated: "emotional" (86%), "sexualized" (83%), "caring" (78%), "sacrificing" (64%), and their parental status (61%). The most commonly agreed upon terms used to describe male athletes were "aggressive" (52%), "arrogant" (45%), "ruthless" (45%), and "strong" (45%) (Chart 9). This finding suggests that professional female athletes also feel that perceptions of them are narrow and that they are boxed into existing notions of what it means to be a woman.

When asked what terms *should* be used to describe female athletes today, responses were less narrowly feminine. Respondents noted leadership traits and traits that highlight commitment (Chart 10). The most often mentioned terms were "competitive" (92%), "confident" (92%), "role model" (92%), "leader" (90%), "determined" (90%), "strong" (88%), and "hard working" (88%).

CHART 9.

Perceived Descriptors of Male and Female Athletes (professional/semi-professional respondents)

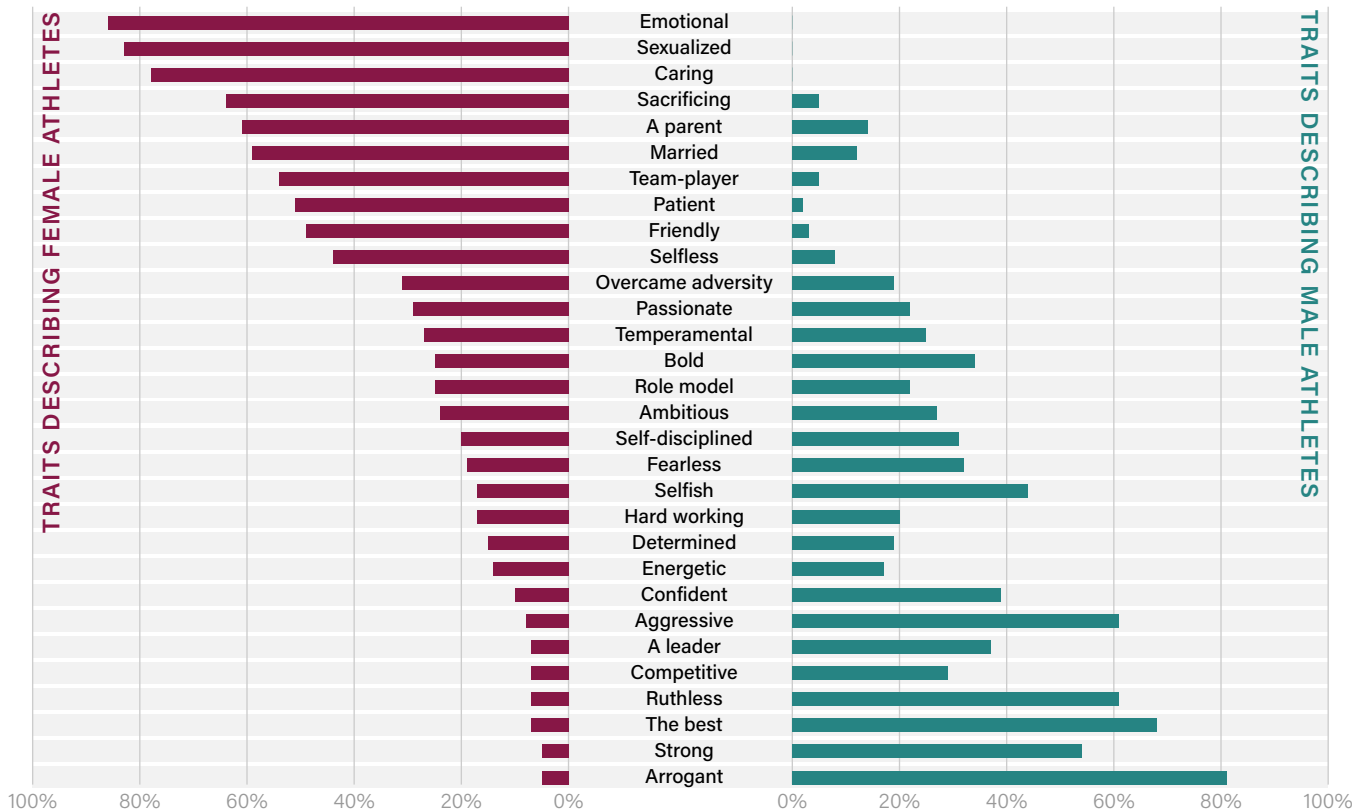
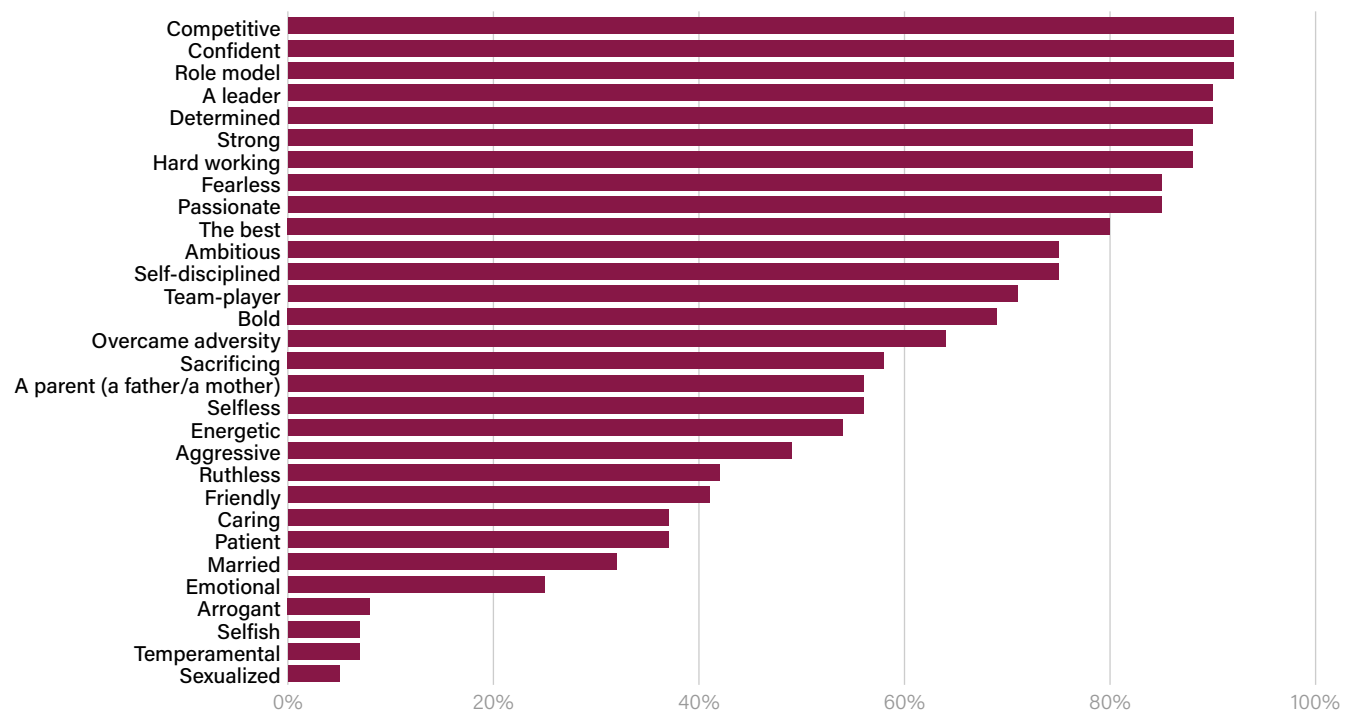


CHART 10.

Proposed Descriptors for Female Athletes (professional/semi-professional respondents)



Recommendations

More Visibility: Elevate, Promote and Show Female Athletes

More visibility for female athletes would have a significant and positive impact on monetary resources and professional opportunities for female athletes. This attention would also inspire new generations of young girls and women to go after athletic pursuits.

Reduce Gender Bias: Create Gender Equitable Policies and Initiatives

Educational institutions, sports leagues, and sponsors can work towards eliminating gender bias by adopting policies that hold them accountable for ensuring that female athletes have equal opportunities for participation, funding, and earnings when compared to their male counterparts. Provide safe and anonymous spaces for individuals to report instances of unfair treatment on the basis of gender without fear of retaliation, to pave the way for accountability.

Foster Female Leadership: Recruit More Women For Various Organizational Roles

Women should be motivated to not only pursue careers and opportunities as athletes, but also to pursue careers and opportunities in other roles in athletics and sports. More female representation in roles like coaches, executives, referees, trainers, sports agents, and scouts would open up more possibilities for career options and also put women in positions of authority and influence.

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Founded in 2004 by Academy Award Winning Actor Geena Davis, the Institute is the only research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media.

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