



Social Inequalities and the Politics of Sports in America

Elizabeth Sharrow, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

Among powerful myths Americans cherish is the idea that sports – at all levels, from youth athletics, to college sports, to professional rivalries – are strictly about leisure and play, a realm safely *outside* of politics. But sports are very much a part of U.S. political life, intertwined with public policies, political debates, and political culture. Examples are plentiful: professional sports stadiums rely heavily on taxpayer subsidies; the rights of athletes to form unions – at the professional and college levels – depend on rulings from the U.S. National Labor Relations Board; the modern Olympic Games have become notorious for leaving host cities in economic duress after they conclude. In short, power and politics are central to sports.

Broader debates over gender and race also take center stage in the worlds of sports. My research explores such issues in several domains, including: sex equity policies in college athletics, and political and media debates over the use of Native American mascots.

Native American Mascots and Racial Politics of Sports

Controversies have long smoldered over the use of Native American symbols for team names and mascots. One side regards such images as a way to “honor” American Indian history, while the other camp argues that teams using indigenous symbols are in effect denigrating American Indian cultures and misappropriating their histories. American high schools, colleges, and professional sports teams have all been caught up in such disputes.

In recent decades, both sports governing institutions like the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and political bodies such as state legislatures have taken stand in these debates. The National Collegiate Athletic Association banned the use of Native American names and symbols in championship competition. Similarly, as many high schools have bowed to local pressures to change their mascots, several state legislatures have considered legislation to ban the use of American Indian imagery on high school teams. But even as these changes have unfolded in lower-level sports, many professional sports teams – including the Chicago Blackhawks, the Atlanta Braves, the Cleveland Indians, and the Washington Redskins – have been reluctant to change. Indeed, the owner of the Washington Redskins, Daniel Snyder, has defiantly proclaimed “We will never change the name of the team. It’s that simple. NEVER – you can use caps.”

A number of political officials, including President Barack Obama and members of the U.S. Congress, expressed support for Native American activists protesting the name of the Washington, stating in a letter: “Native Americans throughout the country consider the ‘R-word’ a racial, derogatory slur akin to the ‘N-word’ among African Americans or the ‘W-word’ among Latinos.” Sports broadcaster Bob Costas also took a stand on the issue.

The involvement of media and political elites challenges the myth that sports exist beyond politics; and their involvement can also shift public opinion, as my research with Tatishe Nteta and Melinda Tarsi shows. Although opinion polls show that the majority of Americans do not support a name change for the Washington Redskins, public acceptance of the name has dwindled in recent years. Our results demonstrate that statements by media elites are especially likely to sway public opinion among white Democrats.

Political leaders often get involved in athletic issues even if sports leaders might prefer that they remain disengaged. Especially on today's racial issues, sports are near the center of public discussions rather than the periphery, as the mascot controversies show. For another example, National Football League quarterback Colin Kaepernick protested racial inequalities in criminal justice during the pre-game national anthem, and similar protests were mounted by Megan Rapinoe during U.S. Women's National Soccer Team games as well as by many other high school, college, and professional athletes. This wave of protests has drawn the Black Lives Matter movement into politics surrounding the National Football League.

Sex Equity Policies

The politics of gender play out in sporting domains as well. As of 1972, when the U.S. Congress enacted Title IX mandating gender equity in schools and athletics as an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sports were not yet central to sex equity discussions. But over the past 45 years the implementation of Title IX has resulted in significant growth in women's athletic opportunities at the high school and intercollegiate levels. Today, women have twelve times as many athletic opportunities as they did before Title IX, yet implementation across all of college athletics remains incomplete. In the Big Ten Athletic Conference, for instance, male athletes enjoy 44% more of the total athletic resources than do women. Much has changed, but the promise of full equality in sports remains unfulfilled.

Furthermore, policymakers have not seriously revisited issues of policy implementation in sports since 1979. In that year, policymakers promoted sex segregated sports, effectively encouraging a system of "separate but equal" for college athletics – just a short time after civil rights policy rejected such practices in the realm of racial justice.

Today, advocates are trying new approaches to gender equity in sports. A key innovation appeared in 2016, when the U.S. Women's National Soccer team famously pursued a pay equity complaint with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, invoking their rights federal equal pay laws. Women athletes frequently use the legal system and engage in political protest to pursue complaints over disparate treatment in college sports programs.

Acknowledging inequalities and social injustices in sports is an important step toward more fully addressing such issues across all of American society. Sports are not realms outside of politics and are not immune to sparking or being affected by larger political disputes. In fact, when Americans face up to controversial issues as they play out *within* sporting venues, this actually increases possibilities for drawing more people into broader conversations about needed social changes. Sports turn out to be a promising (if for some unexpected) venue to advance robust citizen discussions about how America can best realize its enduring ideals of equality.

Read more in Elizabeth Sharrow, "**Female Athlete**" Politic Title IX and the Naturalization of Sex Difference in Public Policy," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5, 1, (2017), 46-66.