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Q: How important is television to the promotion, success and acceptance of women's sports?

Crucial. Television exposure is key to obtaining corporate sponsorship and advertising dollars that have traditionally fueled the economic success of men's college, Olympic and professional sports events. Currently, the glut of men's sports television product has limited opportunities for all but the largest women's sporting events such as the Olympics and World Cup Soccer. Men's sport contracts involving major rights fees tie up prime time slots and consume huge promotional and supporting program time commitments on both the networks and major national cable outlets. Women's sports coverage is relegated to the leftovers: regional cable or limited exposure on network and national cable during less than optimal times.

Significantly, so much is being spent on rights fees for the top five or six men's sports that rights fees for domestic women's sports events are almost non-existent unless they are packaged as a major co-ed sports event (i.e., U.S. Open, Wimbledon, etc.). If the national network and cable pipelines show no sign of opening up in the near future, where will women's sport receive the exposure it needs to finance its growth? Will it be among the hundreds of channels on Direct TV or digital carriage on the unlimited bandwidth of the internet? And if it is the internet, how can the women's sport market prevent itself from getting lost among all the choices? ESPN was the men's sports channel that propelled the men's sports business into a lucrative future and forced the networks to match its promotional and ancillary exposure. ESPN was a place where viewers always knew they could access the product they wanted. Does there need to be a women's channel for the same outcome to be produced for women's sports?

When you look at the big players on the internet or television currently, women's sports programming is fragmented and overshadowed by men's sport coverage at best, and, at worst, women's sport is not there at all. How does the women's sports industry create (1) an anchor presence, (2) delivery of great product in a consistent place, during optimum (or at least predictable) times and (3) a place where the passion and point of difference in women's sport is celebrated and advertised on a hourly basis. Men's and women's sport are two separate products appealing to different audiences, both consisting of male and female fans.

The internet experience and the greater numbers of channels on satellite and cable television tell us that program delivery will be increasingly narrow cast based on specific audience interests, except for the few big broadcast players who have the financial power to acquire the most spectacular events that attract huge general audiences. Given the inconsistent presence of women's sport on broad band delivery systems, the owners of women's sport product would do themselves a necessary common service to make sure a women's sports channel or channels happen.

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Topics

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