
Coverage of women’s sports is about to get as good as it gets – but not for long.

During the Olympics, a cocktail of nationalism, opportunity, success and convergence propels mainstream media coverage of female athletes to record highs. Nationalism because we want to support those competing in our name. Opportunity because, finally, there’s now parity in the number of events open to women and men (women competed in 49 per cent of the events at Atlanta). Of course, success and the expectation of a golden media coverage. It’s also convenient for journalists when women’s and men’s same sport events happen in close proximity to each other.

Women’s sports got an average of 42 per cent of the action on the online news sites I studied over three successive Olympic Games, starting with Sydney in 2000. Then, just as quickly, it was all over. Mainstream sports media meanwomen normal transmission. Female athletes returned to their usual places on the sidelines. In fact, outside of the Games hotspots, mainstream media and television barely cover women’s sports at all.

I do concede that in Australia, for more than 12 months now, it’s been almost impossible to find a newspaper, radio or televisual news bulletin or online sports site that hasn’t been going bonkers over our latest, and some say greatest, top class female athlete. Not to mention her relatively status or the grassroots attention devoted to her every move, campaign and cause. But Black Caviar is a racehorse. And that, in my book, is the problem confronting women’s sports. Even racemakers get more media attention. It will stay that way unless the punters come on side – big time.

Partners already bet on sports. They just don’t bet very much, comparatively speaking. Online bookmaker, CrownBet, turned over around $2.3 billion on women’s sports last year, just 3 per cent of its annual turnover and a fable compared with its largest betting event of the year, the Spring racing carnival. It took more than $7 billion on Melbourne Cup day alone.

CrownBet’s media and communications manager, Michael Frego, says there’s an unbelievable correlation between punters’ interest in sports and television coverage.

“Live sport is at least TV friendly times better values,” he said. “The majority of punters want to be able to see the events they are investing in rather than having a bet and all you can do is look up the result afterwards.”

That’s why, according to Frego, punters will bet on women’s sports during the London Olympics. “Swimming, hockey, basketball – they will all be on at about regularly and quite heavily because punters can match those events and they know those teams perform well.”

So, what needs to happen to improve the odds of greater coverage of women’s sports outside of the Olympics?

SportingBet’s Bill Richardson relays public and punters demand for live sport is growing. “Any sport that’s on live we hold more money on,” he said. “With these mobile channels and free radio, there’s a great demand for content.” So, if women’s sports provide good content, than you certainly think there’d have to be a rise in women’s sport at the overall coverage of sport increases.

Netball could be that good content model for other women’s sports. Channel 10 broadcasts a mix of live and delayed matches from the ANZ Championship, the 10-team competition between Australia and New Zealand. Matches also go live on Sky Sports in New Zealand. Channel 10 broadcasts Netball to build on the popularity of the game in Australia, raising the profile of women’s sports in the media, one thing we need to women’s sports need punters. To get them on side, women’s sports need to be in the public eye and played at a professional level that attracts public interest which, in turn, translates to punters. The promotions run by betting agencies will only serve to reinforce the appeal of those games.

Elianne Jones lectures in Journalism in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. She first examined online reporting of women and sport in 2000 when Sydney hosted the Olympics. This began a longitudinal study of the online world of mediated coverage of elite female sports competition. Her study, tracking the representation of female athletes and their achievements from Sydney to Athens in 2004 and on to Beijing in 2008, has been published in Australian and international journals, and cited in two Australian Federal Government inquiries as well as international textbooks and journal articles on sport and the media.

Elianne is a member of the QLD Public Memory Research Centre.