

Women Changing the Game in Pro Sports

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SPEAKERS

support message, Angela Ruggiero, Jon Solomon, Julie Foudy, Aleshia Ocasio, Tricia Johnson, Kendall Baker

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support message 00:00

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Tricia Johnson 00:32

This is Aspen Ideas To Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. The business of sports is changing says Hockey Hall of Famer Angela Ruggiero. Fans are becoming more aware of the disparities between men's and women's sports and demanding change. Not only that, but the pandemic and technology have changed sports for players and their fans. It's an opportune time, says Ruggiero, to rethink women's role in professional sports.
- A

Angela Ruggiero 00:58

For decades, if not centuries, sports has been built off of a very male model by men for men. Voices are elevating. All voices are elevating. Fans' voices are elevating and they're demanding something different than what they have.



Tricia Johnson 01:15

Today, what if sports were owned, designed and run by women? How would that change the game? Aspen Ideas To Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from the Sports and Society Program at the Institute. Historically men have held leadership roles in professional sports. They've designed the competition formats, chosen which sports stories to elevate, and dictated how athletes are treated. Women, for the most part inherited these sports models. So how would professional sports change if women were at the helm? It's already happening. The success of the National Women's Soccer League has been driven by a female commissioner. Women athletes have taken the WNBA to new heights by standing up against racial injustice. And Athletes Unlimited is introducing new professional softball, volleyball and lacrosse leagues that look nothing like traditional men's leagues. They focus on individual players with no head coaches, club owners or set rosters. In this atmosphere, how can women's leadership make a difference in professional sports? Angela Ruggiero co-founded the Sports Innovation Lab. Julie Foudy is a two-time Women's World Cup champion and founding investor of Angel City FC, a new Los Angeles based pro women's soccer team. And Aleshia Ocasio is a professional softball player and social justice advocate. They're interviewed by Jon Solomon, editorial director of the Sports and Society Program at the Aspen Institute. Here's Solomon.



Jon Solomon 02:41

So let's start with the premise of this conversation: more women in power in sports, right? I want each of you to sort of briefly imagine we have a world where there are more women as sports owners, more women in C suite executive positions on teams, leagues and media companies. What do you think would be different about sports? Angela, do you want to start first?



Angela Ruggiero 03:04

Sure, thanks for having me. I don't think that future is too far away. We're seeing a monumental shift, I think just in general, towards more equity in society. And I think that there's a big opportunity now, I think, for the sports industry to really wrap our arms around that and truly be more inclusive. So I think it's not a fairy tale to say this, this isn't going to happen. I believe this is it's currently happening. And, you know, sometimes it takes a woman to know what women want. You know, that's why the work we do at Sports Innovation Lab is all about really understanding your fan base. And for decades, if not centuries, sports has been built off of a very male model by men for men. And with this massive societal change that's been spurred by technology. And I'll get into that later. voices are elevating, all voices are elevating fans, voices are elevating, and they're

demanding something different than what they have. You know, I think about the long tail. Historically, we've built a model of sports around one, one way of doing business COVID is completely shifted that. So therein lies I think the opportunity for women's sports to rethink how we do business to in some ways, and quite frankly, do it better. And I love to get into this topic because sports as a whole is absolutely shifting, the fan is shifting technology is shifting. It's a moment in time that we've literally never had in the sports industry, to do things better differently. And that's why I believe the time is now for women. So we can get into what it will look like but I just wanted to start with society has changed. Technology has changed. The business of sports is absolutely changing. Now and it's a really exciting time for women's sports to bubble up. And for more women, quite frankly, to get involved in that, and again, takes a woman to know what women want. So we need more women at the table.



Jon Solomon 05:12

Aleshia, just, you know, briefly high level view, what what would be different if women were more in charge of professional sports?



Aleshia Ocasio 05:20

Well, if women were in charge of more professional sports, I don't know think I'd be here with you guys today, having this conversation. With women in these positions, we have more opportunities, more visibility, more coverage, and a more equitable playing field. As Angela said, sports are built by men, for men and with women in these positions, it'd be totally different. And we'd have women betting on women in a more equitable playing field.



Julie Foudy 05:46

Amen. I'll add to that, you don't even have to cue me up on that. I would say everything would be different, Jon. Absolutely. I think one of the things we as, as female athletes across the board doesn't matter which sport, but the thing that you hear when you talk to female athletes, and still to this day, sadly, is we're often an afterthought, right with the group that is running the organization, whether it be a league, a national team, a federation, and its secondary, in terms of no one wakes up at that business or place or league in a large sense and says, Okay, how am I going to make it better for these women today? And I think that's the biggest difference on noticing. And we'll get into this, of course, a lot more. But it's just a shift of mindset instead of just surviving. It's a thriving mentality. We're not here just to survive. We're here to thrive. And that's very different. That shift is a much needed and wonderful one. And I think we are there, as Angela

pointed out, we're getting there. Not fully there, of course, but we are getting there.



Jon Solomon 06:53

Along those lines, I mean, Aleshia, would love to hear from you about what's changed with today's women athletes, right? So Angela, and Julie played in a time where there was some progress in women's sports. But I think to Julie's point a lot more was, you should feel fortunate to have what you have. But it seems like today that is markedly different, and women athletes are demanding more what what is changing.



Aleshia Ocasio 07:18

As an athlete, myself, I feel like we've been conditioned to be thankful for everything that we have. And while I am extremely thankful, I feel like our generation wants more. And we're speaking about it, I feel like we've seen a lot more media coverage. For women. There's actually media outlets that are dedicated to speaking on these athletes and issues that we face. But I think the biggest thing is knowing our worth and going after what we deserve. So with me and my colleagues, that's been a lot of the conversation. And I feel like with Athletes Unlimited, the organization has given us I feel like more so what we deserve and what other I've experienced.



Jon Solomon 07:59

So Angela, let's talk about worth because you're working on this project right now called The Fan Project where you're using data to analyze women's sports. What does this project entail? What do you what do you hope to show? And are there any, any early findings you can share with us?



Angela Ruggiero 08:15

Sure, The Fan Project is a data driven approach. We're going to write a research report at Sports Innovation Lab around the business opportunity for women's sports and really what to do a strategic roadmap for the women's sports industry. I mean, the three of us have probably been on too many calls too many podcast too many of these were we're talking about, we should we could. And I said you know, I can't do this again, even though I'm here today. If I could accelerate change by giving data and talk in the language of business, which is money that I think will really accelerate this industry, which again, maybe they don't fill it with their heart, and that's fine. But if you can talk dollars and cents and save, you're leaving money on the table, because there's a market out there a massive market that's been undervalued, underserved, misunderstood. So the fan project

is about looking at fan data. So I would encourage everyone here to go on to fan project.co. We want basically your social media history will anonymize it and look at it and aggregate and say, Look, we've been ranking women's sports based on Nielsen ratings and we all know the statistic of 4% Well, we're in a chicken in the egg conundrum. Well, oh, people don't watch women's sports. We're not on TV. No kidding. But there are avid fans out there. And we all know this that are on social media that are digitally savvy that are on finding you know content on Twitch. These these fluid fans as we call them, women sports fans are avid there they are. And they're they're the future fan to be quite honest. So A fan project is basically saying let's not look at Nielsen alone. Yes, we should incorporate viewership numbers because that's important. But we historically as an industry, women sports have gotten ding because we don't have the same reach as the men. We don't have the same volume. So we should rethink no fan engagement looks very different today than it did 10 years ago. It includes what you're doing on social media, what are you liking one of the apps you're downloading? What are you buying an orange hoodie, that doesn't get counted? When you buy the W, you know, W NBA hoodie, that that sits in another CRM system? So we're saying can we aggregate all these other forms of fan engagement through the fan project, and give you a better look at the behaviors of fans and say, you're missing the boat here, sports industry, there's a lot of data that say there's a market out there. So the fan project is about, you know, smacking the industry around saying gotta move faster. Here's the data to prove it, you're measuring the wrong things. There's a market, a hungry, avid, digitally savvy market. Let us show you who they are. So we're asking fans to do good with their data. And, you know, let us analyze their behavior, which I think will speak to everything that this conversation will be about.



Jon Solomon 11:14

That's interesting. Will there be a report that will come out? Or what will you do then with this data?



Angela Ruggiero 11:19

We'll write a report, and it will come out in June. And like I said, it'll not just be here's the the underserved market that you haven't been able to see. But also what to do, we want to provide a strategic roadmap for the industry on how to actually move women's sports forward through this new business model. Again, everything I do at sports Innovation Lab is studying the fluid Fan Fan behaviors fan engagement, fans are shifting overnight, the in COVID exposed just how fragile the sports industry is, in some ways, yes, we have our traditional media rights or traditional sponsorship, ticket sales. But all these the the new revenue opportunities are these new fan behaviors, these new fan engagement streams, that to me is where you're a lot of your women's sports fans live because they can't view

they can't buy they can't attend. But they are active and they're out there. And again, that's the path to growth for the future. So it's a report, John, but really think of it more of a strategic roadmap of the how.



Jon Solomon 12:23

Julie, I mean, look at that there are many cases, women sports seem to be doing more with less. I know we don't want to always just look at TV ratings and Nielsen viewership. But if you look over the past year during COVID, TV ratings were down across the board for the large majority of men's pro sports leagues. And while men sports still typically draw far more viewers than women's sports, look at some of the growth for women's sports. NWSL viewership was up 500%, WNBA regular season was up 68% and the finals were up 15%. The LPGA viewership increased 21%. NCAA women's basketball Final Four was up 14%, and the highest in nine years. Julie, what lessons can be learned from that this growth?



Julie Foudy 13:10

Yeah, I mean, to Angela's point they're engaging in they're rabid for information. NWSL actually lead all professional teams in social media engagement during the pandemic for their games. And you also had I think, the China Robinson was the one my ESPN colleague who tweeted during March Madness that, you know, at one point one night, there was 39 million impressions, social media impressions for the women's games, and it was double what the men's engagement was. And so I do think we are measuring it in the wrong way. And that really is one of the things that Angel City, a woman led group female majority owned. And what they're thinking about is, how do we not only provide brands that support the team, of course, but brands that support our values, and it's very value based, what they're doing is, for example, there are giving back 10% of all sponsorship money to the community to not for profits to work we can do in the community. And they did their seat deposits, for example, they realize one of the biggest barriers to women continuing to play sports and young girls is they don't have a sports bra and underserved communities. And so for every seat deposit, they gave away sports bra, LinkedIn with Nike. And so you have just the thoughtfulness about the value based agenda behind what we're doing its mission and purpose. It's not just yeah, we're here to win soccer games, of course. And we're here to build a successful model, but we're also here to make a difference in our community. I think that is another stark difference with women led organizations and that they're tying into What matters to fans emotionally viscerally. And what you're seeing is they're following. They're loving that they're, you know, they're very brand loyal. And I think brands are starting to realize it's a different different model when it's run by women.



Jon Solomon 15:17

Yeah, I mean, Julie said it's a phenomenal investor group that you're part of. You know, Natalie Portman, Jessica Chastain, Eva Longoria, Serena Williams, Abby Wambach, Mia Hamm, and the list goes on and on. I even saw where Eva Longoria said she receives more calls about funding a soccer team and she ever did about her own acting career. So how did this group come together and what lessons maybe can be learned about how female led ownership groups could come together like this in pro sports?



Julie Foudy 15:51

Our zoom calls are very entertaining, our ownership zoom calls I must I must admit, it came together. I call her our godmother, our catalyst behind it all Natalie Portman because Natalie bless her soul heard Abby Wambach speak at a time's up event. And Abby was talking about her very different reality as a iconic legendary female athlete retire in realizing that, hey, I was just at the SBS receiving this award next to Peyton Manning and Kobe Bryant. And their retirement reality was very different than mine. So Abby's telling the story, and Natalie's thinking, Well, why can't we change that? Why can't we change this model? So that it's different for women, and we're thinking more intentionally about their careers. And obviously, that's not going to happen overnight. But the beautiful thing about Natalie Portman is it wasn't just Hey, why can't we change this? It was, why can't we change this, and I'm going to actually move on this and do something about it. When Natalie got all her friends from Hollywood to join in. And when they came to me, and Mia, we said, well, this seems like something we should get all our friends involved in as well. So we had 14 of us from the US women's national team with ties to Los Angeles, I'll jump in, of course, as well. And then when you have those types of groups behind something like that, it's obviously easy at a tipping point to bring others in because they want to be involved with such a great group. But really, it was Natalie having the vision to say, I want to change this model, because I think this is an untapped resource that has a ton of upside and a ton of potential. And then you get investors like Alexis Ohanian, bless him, and Serena Williams, who obviously understand that.



Jon Solomon 17:34

Julie, the US has struck out a couple times in the past trying to get a sustainable --



Julie Foudy 17:39

Jon, why do you have to do that? Why do you have to go there?



Jon Solomon 17:42

What what are the lessons you've learned from past attempts? And then do you think this time will be any different?



Julie Foudy 17:48

Lessons learned is that it's hard, of course, to run a women's professional league. I think this time will be very different. It's a different model in terms of you have US Soccer as well, who from the very beginning of NWSL, now in their ninth season was on board and the first two leagues, they didn't have that partnership with US Soccer. So it was difficult. I think you have a model that is really at this wonderful starting point, you're seeing this traction in this movement and this interest in energy around this league, and people are starting to finally realize the potential of it. So I think the first two iterations of a woman's Professional Soccer League, we learned a ton in terms of management and spending and how to make sure that we are doing things efficiently and smartly. And I think all those things have played into the success of this third league. But I do feel like it's, it's it's very different with this third iteration. And especially now when you're seeing you know, some of the new teams that are coming in and the owners that are coming with it.



support message 19:00

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Jon Solomon 20:17

So, Aleshia, I want to talk a little bit about new competition formats that we're seeing with women's sports because you're part of a really unique model with Athletes Unlimited for

women's pro softball. They've also created leagues for lacrosse and volleyball. There's re-drafting of players each week, points are awarded almost sort of like fantasy, sports style scoring based on team and individual performance. You got players involved in creating the playing rules, right, and the marketing strategies and the racial equity committee work. So what was that like for players to have that kind of ownership of a team and then even a league really?

A

Aleshia Ocasio 20:55

Athletes Unlimited is very unique. We have a very innovative scoring system that some people might look at as unorthodox. Actually, everyone would, because it's obviously not traditional, which was, you know, really cool. At first, I was a little bit skeptical about it, but you know, and playing it and, you know, experience it firsthand. You know, it grew on me, because it was just so different. And I you know, as Angela and Julie, you know, mentioned before, like there's a shift in women's coverage and there needs to be shift and how I do things in order to, to engage and for people to connect. So you know, what athletes Unlimited, the misconception is that it's all individual base, and there's no really there's no team aspect, which I'm here to debunk. So you can get points for Team wins, you'll get 50 points for Team wins, but you can also get points for each anyone. So you can still lose a game and break even with your points on the team level. So it's really important that you know, we're still a cohesive as a team. But we can also get points for individual accolades, like getting hits, striking people out homeruns. So the scoring system is a lot different, but I think I think that's what we need. Right now in the softball world. There's such a huge disparity between college softball and Pro Softball. There hasn't even been a softball league in the past two years aside from athletes unlimited. So, you know, I think it's first season I, you know, it's here to stay, because I think it was just such a great thing for our sport, and keeping fans engaged in getting in and handing out through the scoring system.

J

Jon Solomon 22:32

It was also interesting that you all three drafted players each week, it was like a five week season, all played in one city in one location. Did you learn lessons about like, who did you draft and what was that like being a player, but you're also essentially sort of a captain or the coach of a team?

A

Aleshia Ocasio 22:49

I talked to my wife Natasha about this a lot of pressures or privilege, I think historically. And traditionally, you'll have coaches who are doing all this for you who are picking the

teams who are putting the position who are making up practice plans, but being a captain, you know, that's all on your hands and as much as you want it to be, because we do have facilitators, who will help us throughout the process. But as a captain, I came up with practice plans, I would consult with the facilitators and some of the vets in our league as well on my team. But it's just really taking ownership of what's right in front of you. And, and it's a lot of responsibility. Some people kind of delegated that responsibility to other teammates or their facilitators, but it's really cool to play around league. So we got to say, and pretty much everything that was going on within our team in the league as a whole. So is different. But as I mentioned before, pressure is a privilege and it was really cool to have ownership over my team in those moments as a captain.

J

Jon Solomon 23:45

It's interesting. Angela, you're on the advisory group, you know, for Athletes Unlimited, you help brainstorm this model. They got some some good pickup early on. They've been broadcast or streamed by ESPN, CBS Sports, Fox Sports. Their sponsors like Nike, Geico and Gatorade. I know players earn between about \$10,000 and \$40,000 over the five week season. What are your thoughts on whether this model can work and what women's sports or even you know men's sports as well could take from this model?

A

Angela Ruggiero 24:18

I'm obviously biased. We worked literally on a whiteboard to create the league. And it was based on our research, which again, I love, which is sports is sports is changing overnight, and they saw that, that fans fluid fans follow individuals. That's again, I think, a big reason why you have the scoring system, that fluid fans follow values. The new age consumer wants to align with a brand that represents and looks like who they are. Fluid fans are digitally savvy. That's why you know, they've done a great job getting on different platforms, not just linear broadcast. So the league itself was structured in a way that was forward thinking, future thinking and the fact that it empowers women. gives the rights the athletes to, you know, have a maternity policy or play in another league. It's always meant to be a shoulder League, not the the standalone League, it's supplemental income, it's supplemental visibility. But it i think is laying the foundation for for experimentation and what's possible in sports. I love the Alicia had a great experience. I love that other athletes are saying, Let's come back for season two and that more sports will be included. Again, this panel is about let's do things differently. A use an example of that. And I would like to address why we haven't switched things. This industry has been very secure for decades. Rights fees are locked up long term deal sponsorship Julie's point before that women's sports is always an afterthought. The entire sports ecosystem is rethinking how we do business and and I wonder why we're not where we're at. I'd love to have a

conversation around the implicit bias in the system. If you Google, we did this, who are the most popular NCAA basketball players, Google actually has a default that looks for men. So they list 10 male basketball players. But if you look at the number of followers, you have more women on that list. If you think about venture funding, and Julie's group 2% of venture funding goes to women found companies that we like to invest in people that look like ourselves. So And therein lies again, implicit bias and funding that goes into women's sports, women's products, women's health care. I sat on the board of the IOC and initiated the gender equality project. I was dumbfounded WHY, WHY CAN'T women's hockey be the last event at the Winter Olympics or women's marathon? Why is it always the men's marathon or men's hockey? Why can't we switch up scheduling that impacts? viewership? Why are there differences in equipment? Why are there differences in bonuses that you see at the Federation level? Why, why why we should be asking these sorts of questions to really unlock the implicit bias in all the ways that men's sports have been funded. For decades men's sports have been visible. There's a why behind this. And again, it's encouraging because people are asking those questions and you have groups like Natalie Portman's group and Julie they're saying, okay, we can change that we can get women, we can invest in women. And again, it's that that awareness that I think that will really push like, Huh, you're right, I guess we could alternate men's and women's marathon that would be more equitable. And you know, just take someone asking the question.



Julie Foudy 27:36

It's amazing too how much just one example like at Angel City and what we've done. And granted, I understand it's, it's an Hollywood celebrity laden group, which is, in and of itself, a hard one to come about. But it's a roadmap for others, to your point and is now there's so many people immediately after Angel City was announced, I cannot tell you how many calls I got from friends in New York City friends in Chicago, friends in Northern California friends in Washington, DC, saying, holy hell, we could totally do this. We could do this. And then you're seeing now Chicago red stars, for example, and nws out a huge new ownership group that included you know, ESPN colleague, Sarah Spain, NFL stars, NBA players, tech people, all these different wonderful silos coming together to build that are all from the Chicago market. You're seeing that in DC, as you said, Chelsea Clinton, Jenna Bush, joining that with Dominique Dawes, and Briana Scurry, I mean, this diversity and these different silos that are coming together is fascinating. But it took, you know, a little bit of a nudge to say, hey, this is doable in your market as well, let's go. And I do think it can offer a roadmap not just for soccer, of course, but for other sports leagues as well.



Jon Solomon 28:53

It's also really interesting, we're seeing women take more ownership of the stories that are

being told for women's sports. So for instance, Alex Morgan, Simone Manuel, Chloe Kim, all, you know, elite star athletes, they started a new media and commerce company, they're going to be creating original content for social media platforms, form licensing deals, sell merchandise, and who is their key audience? It's girls and young women, you know, interested in sports, as well as focusing on topics like activism, culture, wellness, beauty. And Aleshia, I wonder, you know, what you think about something like this from active athletes taking more ownership of it? And will we see more of this?

A

Aleshia Ocasio 29:35

Absolutely. I think it's really important that we have platforms like this out there. Too often. I feel like people try to tell our stories for us. So in creating this, this platform is organization to be able to have our narratives be told to young woman and you know, even you know, young boys and non binary people, it's really important to be able to see people who look like them to be able to look To know that anything is possible that other people go through things that they might go through as well. You know, we talked about this shift, I've seen so many media platforms that are now changing the narrative and telling stories. And I think that's one thing that's, you know, so awesome about athletes and limited, as well as the storytelling that that our content team has done. And it's been a lead in, in pivotal and in the growth of our league. But with, you know, together, I think it's an awesome, awesome thing that they're doing and putting together and I've already seen some great pieces.

J

Julie Foudy 30:33

Jon, just to add one quick thing in there and Angela understand this, I'm sure - us, old bags. When you go back to our time, right, we would be like, hey, could you, you know, could we do more merchandising would say to the Federation, for example, US Soccer Federation, shouldn't we be doing more around this or this or this? And they'd be like, that's not gonna sell. It's not gonna sell. It's not, you know, the markets, not their fan base engagement, isn't there? Right? Well, the current US women's soccer team, when they would say that to us soccer. And here's the difference to Alicia's point that they would say, Hey, you know, we want to do more Merchandising, and instead of waiting for us soccer, or Nike, or whoever it is, they basically said, Oh, hell, no, I'm gonna do it myself. I had a great conversation with Alex Morgan, a couple years back where she was like, Yeah, they kept telling us, no, us, her. And so we were like, okay, we're gonna do our own shirts, we'll start our own business. And then they go crush it. I mean, she said, like, we sold a million pieces in the first year or something ridiculous. And so that's the difference back in our day, we would have been like, we kept knocking and rattling and shaking, but we wouldn't. At least we didn't have the foresight back then to say, Well, why don't we just do

this ourselves? Let's own this.

A

Angela Ruggiero 31:47

But it's an interesting trend, again, that athletes historically have had this barrier. This is across all sports. It's athlete, agent, to the consumer. It's athlete, national governing body to the consumer. It's athlete, sponsor to the you know, there's this barrier. We're direct to consumer now, athletes have completely shifted in power, if Alesha wants to say something she gets on Twitter and overnight, or voices out there, which is great. So athletes across the board are empowered by technology. Now they have a voice, they can spin up a company they can you even just look at volume of followers volume of you know, the channel is the athlete now, not necessarily the league or the team. So with that dynamic, I think, again, women's sports has a massive opportunity to be that the athletes themselves are the influencers are the platform are the the influencers that to Julie's point may not need, the Federation may not maybe they need the logo, but athletes are getting creative. And women tend to be more vulnerable, open. There's a whole market that is hungry for that kind of influencer. Whereas the men typically use their channels. And they're talking about their statistics or so there's a again, I think, a massive shift in society enabled by technology that's giving athletes a voice and women's athletes are leaning into it hard.

J

Jon Solomon 33:09

Julie, there are some media outlets, doing a good job of covering women's sports. ESPNW is one that you're very familiar with. There's a website called Just Women's Sports, and that's another. I wonder, has the idea of creating these separate silos for women's sports coverage, proven to be a benefit for women's sports? Or is it made it more difficult for the average sports fan to find women's sports?

J

Julie Foudy 33:34

It's a tough one. It's a great question. And one I grapple with a lot right with ESPNW, as well. I think that, that what you're seeing is in just women's sports, for example, Haley Rosen started that Stanford soccer player. Yes, Haley. Basically, she said, and I remember talking to her in the early stages, like, look, there's just not enough out there, and I'm tired of it. And we can we can change this model. You know, just what we were talking about before. Whatever the business is, you're now seeing women step into this space at Ey, which does a lot of streaming of women's soccer matches, for example, started by a woman who said, this is ridiculous that we can't find a lot of these international matches and leagues and people want to consume it. So I think there's a purpose for it. Similar to

what Billie Jean King says about the Women's Sports Foundation, hopefully one day we won't need a Women's Sports Foundation, she says right, and that there will be equality and inclusion and equal pay across play across the field for these women and I won't have to be, you know, involved in a foundation that really continues to advocate for that. But we're not there yet. And so I think, you know, I welcome into this space, anyone that says, hey, let's let's present something that's completely different than what we're seeing on linear and figure out a way to tap into that market. Because as as we've said, this whole panel right there is, it's the argument we give, we gave to us soccer for so many years, I don't care where you fall on your love hate of women's sports. The reality is, there is an entire untapped potential there that has a lot of dollar signs behind it. And that actually made them pay attention. And so and that's what I'm hoping is the future for women's sports with a lot of women saying we can do this. And we're going to show you how to do it. And we're going to lead the way in this way.



Jon Solomon 35:30

Yeah. Well, listen, we want to take some audience questions. I want to introduce now Kendall Baker, he's sports editor of Axios Sports, and he's going to moderate this portion of the discussion. Kendall.



Kendall Baker 35:46

Thanks, Jon. I'm going to start with what seems to be the most popular submitted question a lot, a lot of folks basically asking what what can we do to help what calls to action do the panelists have for fans for everyday individuals to support at the grassroots level?



Angela Ruggiero 36:03

I mean, I would, I would say help our cause. The fan project.co we're trying to, again, get fans to help us see literally their fandom measure their fandom, and express that that interest that that, that fan engagement to the industry. So that that would be one easy way to help me and what our group of partners that in it, and we're writing report for the WNBA for the National Women's Soccer League, they're all our partners, WWE, UFC, we've got LPGA we've got a lot of great groups on there. I want to make it easy for them to go to sponsors for them to go to media and say, look, here's the business case. I'd say talk to your government representative, Title Nine where if this isn't an American conversation here in particular, Title Nine, you we have to continue to support support groups like the Women's Sports Foundation, that are advocating on a daily basis that are raising money on a daily basis and supporting women's sports in particular watch, show

up and watch. I mean, when Julie's calling a game tune in make it a point. I know it's hard to find work, but we're diehard so make sure you're watching you're tweeting you're liking your you're buying buy a season ticket last season or two seasons ago because last season got canceled two seasons who can now I bought season tickets for Harvard, women's hockey, I was a Harvard hockey player, could I go to all the games? No, I have kids and I'm busy. I gave the tickets away. Again, buy season tickets to your National Women's Soccer League and give them away if you can't attend spend money. We need people to spend money. So again, I would love you to help me but in the fan project, I'm trying to use data but there are a myriad of ways you all can get involved and again, and show your support. Be vocal, at the end of the day. We need everyone.

J

Julie Foudy 37:56

And show the brands that support women in sports, the love. It is amazing with Budweiser came on as the the national NWSL sponsor, the amount of fan engagement of people holding up their Budweiser as drinking Budweiser as everyone was going out buying different Budweiser products. And so I do think that type of engagement is seen by the sponsors and those companies, but support them for getting in there and saying, hey, this matters to us. And so and I echo you know, and with engagement seats, butts and seats helps obviously, of course buying season tickets, all those things.

K

Kendall Baker 38:38

Next question, moving on. And we'll start with you, Aleshia, you know, we talked a little bit about different models here. And another question asked by multiple folks was, how do we address women's interests in terms of gender separate structure to sports versus not? So basically the WNBA model attaching to an existing league like the NBA or these kind of standalone leagues that we're seeing, you know, pop up more? Can you kind of speak to those two separate models and maybe how that points to the future or, or you know, where we go from here?

A

Aleshia Ocasio 39:10

Yeah, I'm no professional, like Angela and Julie with this stuff. But from experience, I know that my life and my leagues would be a lot different if we were to have the MLB as a big brother to help us out as the web has the NBA. I know for a while and speaking with my wife Natasha that the W NBA, they weren't able to stand alone without the NBS help at a certain point and now she feels comfortable and confident in saying that they are able to now in comparison to leagues that do it themselves, which I feel like nowadays is you know, kind of what we have to do in order to be seen to flourish, to get what we need

done and be seen and to be able to play. You know, we talked a lot about it earlier, more so Angela and Julie about kind of just you know if if you're not going to Help us we got to do it ourselves. And I feel like that's what athletes unlimited is doing. Baseball players don't even have salary caps. What is it to write off a player salary to help our women's leagues grow? What is it to donate to help the woman to sport foundation to just, you know, support these grassroots organizations so that we have more equitable playing field? There's differences, but, you know, I feel like we have to kind of, at this point, do it ourselves.

K

Kendall Baker 40:28

And pass it off to Julie and Angela, I'm curious if you have any thoughts, just in terms of, as Alicia was saying that, it seems you know, in many examples in Angela, women's hockey, women's pro hockey kind of had this debate and, you know, last year a lot, which is basically, you know, do we go the WNBA model? Do we partner with the NHL? Or do we do this ourselves? And it does seem like that is maybe a growing conversation in terms of when do you start talking about that? Because it does seem like, you know, having the men's leads help in the beginning is obviously necessary in many cases. But is there more conversation around making that transition? Or is it also just that there's more opportunities to start from day one is an independent kind of standalone league?

A

Angela Ruggiero 41:09

It's an interesting question, do you need a men's league to be successful? Men's leagues can have had decades, centuries, millions and billions of dollars invested. So it makes sense they have the infrastructure in place the shared services and in place to support a women's league? I don't think you have to I think the best cases there is some brotherly love shared services. But you know, I don't necessarily think women's sports now has to have a male arm now. Yeah, look at the Olympics. You have all men's women's all countries under one umbrella, of course, hosting an event hosting a Wimbledon, we have men's and women's under the same umbrella. Those all makes sense. They're treated equally, though, under one brand. And so if you can, if the NHL were to say we're going to treat a Women's League equally, and same thing with the W, the NBA were to say, I'm going to treat the W equally, then I would say Hell yeah, let's go. But what Julie said before, are you going to lift it and shift it, shrink it and pink it and underfunded and you expect it to be successful? It's not going to work. So, you know, I think it's great to have men's leagues to, you know, utilize their infrastructure and the resources that they currently have. But I'd like to think we're in an era where you don't need it in unless it was again, one plus one equals three, where think about wimpleton, where they've said, Hey, we're going to have equal prize money, we're going to have equal infrastructure, we're

going to have equal branding, equal court time, and that's at the IOC. We were slowly moving in that direction, almost 50% of the athletes will be female. So it's a tricky question. To get there quicker. Yeah, it'd be great to walk into a system. But I wouldn't ever want to be in a system where you're the, you know, the ugly stepchild that doesn't get treated the same way.

K

Kendall Baker 43:01

Another question that multiple people asked, we talked about, we talked about more female leadership and ownership at the C suite level. few folks asked about, how do we leverage the momentum and energy here to impact the future of female coaches? And how to get more women into coaching at the recreational, collegiate and pro leagues? And how might that impact girls participation in sports? Julie, take that one off.

J

Julie Foudy 43:24

Yeah. I think it'd be huge. I mean, we know that, you know, so much of a person's first experience dictates whether they stay with a sport or not for a young kid, right. And it's often a luck of the draw type of situation where it's a volunteer coach, often, you know, a dad and bless his soul, but maybe it's not, you know, the most positive environment that a kid can get into. And so I think we absolutely have to do a better job of building out that pipeline. I mean, one of the things I've noticed with the soccer community is that they're starting finally, to make it easier for women to actually attend coaching, seminars, coaching lysing courses. And I mean, for for a long time, it's been this low hanging fruit that we should been able to recognize, like, hey, it's really hard. It's really expensive. It's really time consuming for a woman to go through this coaching license courses and, and all the steps it takes to get there. And oh, by the way, they're like the only woman there with you know, 500 men and that's kind of weird, like and as players are we being offered the ability to get our license and so now you're seeing for example, national team players can get their license while playing on the national team in the USL professional players can get their license while playing and so we're doing a better job of planting that seed. No one ever came to me when I was a player and said, Hey, do you want to think about this? Do you want to think about the possibility of coaching as a career and getting your license because here's this you know, that's available to you. That we're going to help you go down this path. And and that, you know, doesn't just apply to coaching. I think one of the things that's nice to see at Angel City is obviously player well being retirement funds for players creating seminars and educational classes and opportunities for them to think beyond just, you know what it looks like to be a professional soccer player. What if you want to be a GM? What if you wanted to get into different industry? How do you do that, and having those conversations while they're playing. And so I think the same goes with

coaching, and we're starting to get there, but boy, is it really late. And as a result you're seeing, there's just not a lot of women out there coaching, and I think really could be a gift if we start adding more women into that equation.

K

Kendall Baker 45:46

And this is for all three of you. The 50th anniversary of Title Nine is your way to dream big, what would you want to see for the next 50 years as we build on that?

A

Aleshia Ocasio 45:57

As a softball player, we weren't granted full team scholarships, softball wasn't considered a revenue sport, it is now recently in the NCAA has been considered a revenue sport. So I would love to see a quality as far as scholarships, I had to scratch for pennies as a college athlete, just, you know, equal opportunities. As far as that goes, you know, we're more than more than qualified. So I would love to see, you know, the needle pushed a lot further so that we're on the same playing field.

J

Julie Foudy 46:32

I would love to see an environment where, you know, you're not flipping into social media and seeing that there's two dumbbells and one yoga mat. Right? Oh, we didn't have the space and looking and see in 2021, the corresponding, you know, facilities for the men, I would love to see a situation where we're not still having to say you who were here, I would love to see a situation where girls are playing professionally and young women are playing professionally in all sports, whether it's linked with a men's league to help them get off the ground, or they're doing it independently. They're doing it right and they're loving it. And a young girl or young boy has the opportunity in every sport to watch these women role models and their markets and be able to go to a game, I would love for us to have to stop suing people for equal pay, and actually just get equal pay to end on a positive. I do think that we're making great strides we are. But gosh, there's so much more we have to do. And the fact that we constantly have to remind people that we shouldn't be an afterthought is what gets most frustrating. And that's what I want to be done with. I don't want to have to keep doing that.

A

Angela Ruggiero 47:54

I would say I mean echo everything. The government around the world funds their women's youth sports equally to their men's funds, their if they have collegiate sports like we do here, funds amico, if they have Olympic sports funds them equally. If you're a

federation, you fund them equally, money, money, money, I want money to be equally flowing, because that changes everything in terms of the opportunity. And that we have women's sports, we have pro sports, that the best players in the world can play till they're 40 and not retire early because they need to get a job that my son My two sons grew up not knowing the difference between men's and women's sports that maybe maybe they prefer women's sports because the fan experience is so much better. To me that 50 years is a long time but I think it's possible to get to a point where we equally value sport as a platform to teach about life that to me, that's why I love sport. It's about all the intangibles, you learn the teamwork the determination that if we have a society recognizes that's what we're giving to our children. We should be giving it to boys we should be giving it to girls, and and we should fund those equally so that again, the money flows, the investment flows. You know, to Julie's point it's in the pro side now. Then we don't see gender we're having this conversation Kendall and 50 years and, you know, be around but, but that my boys are like, Alright, that was great. Do I go to a women's game or men's game? They all look the same. And they're, you know, we're not having this conversation.

T

Tricia Johnson 49:45

Aleshia Ocasio recently completed her first season playing pro softball in a newly created by Athletes Unlimited. Julie Foudy is a former captain of the US women's soccer team and a broadcaster at ESPN. Angela Ruggiero played us women's hockey And sits on the advisory board for Athletes Unlimited. Jon Solomon is the editorial director of the Sports and Society Program at the Aspen Institute. Today's conversation is part of Sports and Society's Future of Sports conversation series, meant to help stakeholders think through the future of sports. Find a link to other future of sports videos in our show notes. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas To Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today's discussion is from Sports and Society and this show is produced by Marci Krivonen and me. Our music is by Wonderly I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.

S

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