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Tue, 03/07/2012 - Dianne Jones

 **Limited media coverage for women's sport means limited commercial opportunities for women's sport. Dianne Jones says female athletes will get their time in the spotlight during the London Olympics, but will it last once the flame has been extinguished?**

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 convenience 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 near parity in the number of events open to women and men (women competed in 45 per cent of the events at Beijing). Of course, success and the expectation of it generates 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 resumed normal transmission. Female athletes returned to their usual place on the sidelines. In fact, outside of the Games fortnight, most studies in Australia and internationally show women's share of mainstream sports coverage dives to well below 10 per cent.

I do concede that in Australia, for more than 12 months now, it's been almost impossible to find a newspaper, radio or television news bulletin or online sports site that hasn't been going bonkers over our latest, and some say greatest, top class (female) athlete. Nor do I begrudge her the celebrity status or the microscopic attention devoted to her every move, campaign and conquest. But, Black Caviar is a racehorse. And that, in my book, is the root of the problem confronting women's sports. Even racehorses get more media attention. It will stay that way unless the punters come on side – big time.

Punters already bet on women's sports. They just don't bet very much, comparatively speaking. Online bookmaker, Centrebet, turned over around \$6.3million on women's sports last year, just .5 per cent of its annual turnover and a trifle compared with its largest betting event of the year, the Spring racing carnival. It took more than \$7million on Melbourne Cup day alone.

Centrebet's media and communications manager, Michael Felgate, sees an umbilical connection between punters' interest in sports and television coverage.

"Live sport or at least TV friendly times assist bet volumes," he said. "The majority of punters want to be able to see the sports 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 Felgate, punters will bet on women's sports during the London Olympics. "Swimming, hockey, basketball – they will all be bet on quite regularly and quite heavily because punters can watch those teams 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 Richmond reckons public and punter demand for live sport is growing. "Any sport that's on live we hold more money on," he said. "With three Foxtel channels and Fox Footy, there's a greater demand for content. So, if women's sports provide good content, then you'd certainly think there'd have to be a rise in women's sport as 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 to air on SKY Sports in New Zealand. Centrebet's turnover confirms punters have warmed to netball, making it the betting agency's biggest women's team sport. Did Netball Australia see that coming?

While sports administrators, publicists and players wrestle with how best to raise the profile of women's sports in the media, one thing seems clear. 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.

Dianne 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. Thus began a longitudinal study (in terms of the online world) of mediated coverage of this elite athletic competition. Her studies, tracking the representation of female athletes and their achievements from Sydney to Athens in 2004 and on to Beijing in 2008, have been published in Australian and international journals, and cited by two Australian Federal Government inquiries as well as international textbooks and journal articles on sport and the media. Dianne is a member of the USQ Public Memory Research Centre.

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