

You Write Like a Girl: Gender Inequity in Sports Journalism

by

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Thesis

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Prologue

The last time I cried was January 9th, 2018. It was an ugly cry, a full-body sob that left my eyes red and puffed the next morning when I peeled myself off the tiles of my bathroom floor. I have shed a few tears here and there since that night (or morning, technically, since it was a little after midnight on the 9th that I began crying), but nothing has come close to the waterworks that choked me up so much I almost puked. As a former competitive gymnast trained by Russian and Romanian coaches, I was taught not to show emotion. If I cried during practice, I was sent away to do rope climbs until I composed myself. I eventually learned to blink away any tears until they just stopped flowing entirely. But as I watched Tua Tagovailoa skirt defenders on 2nd and 26, then toss the game-winning touchdown to a wide-open receiver scampering untouched into the end zone, I couldn't help it.

A few hours earlier, I'd been feeling cautiously optimistic. A historic double-overtime win over Oklahoma in the Rose Bowl meant Georgia had earned a spot in the 2018 College Football Playoff National Championship, where the Dawgs would face Alabama, a college football juggernaut led by Nick Saban, who many call the NCAA equivalent of Bill Belichick. Analysts had Georgia as the underdog leading up to the game and predicted that Alabama's veteran quarterback, Jalen Hurts, would prevail over Georgia's freshman starter, Jake Fromm. Despite the odds being stacked against us, I felt like we could pull off the upset and make up for all those heart-breaking losses that resulted in several "but if" and "almost" seasons. As in "We almost scored that game-winning touchdown!" "But if our running back hadn't been suspended, we would've won the conference!" "It's almost our time. We just need a better offensive line coach."

When the confetti rained down inside Mercedes Benz Stadium after back-up quarterback Tagovailoa replaced a struggling Hurts and led the Crimson Tide to victory, I interlaced my fingers behind my head with my elbows out (in a position sports fans call the “Surrender Cobra”) and paced slowly around the room. I blinked and sniffled at first, but finally gave in to the wave of utter devastation that I fully realize is a little dramatic for a football game. I felt like I had been hit by a ton of bricks, like all the air had been sucked out of my lungs, like I had been run over by an 18-wheeler. The dream season was over with no title to show for it. We would have to go another offseason reciting every Georgia sports fan’s mantra: “There’s always next year.” My grandma, who had come over to watch the game and heard me sobbing from a few rooms over, came out in her nightgown to give me a long, silent hug. I knew that in the grand scheme of things this game wouldn’t matter. It didn’t directly impact my life, and I could keep on living as if it had never happened. But in that moment, seeing the bigger picture didn’t relieve the pain in my chest.

I laid in my bed in the complete darkness and called my friend Mari. She cared little about college football but knew how devoted I was to the Georgia Bulldogs. She listened while I explained every play of the downfall through tears and comforted me when I kept saying how stupid it was to be this upset over a football game. She was with a friend from her high school at the time, and he got on the phone to say I reminded him of the little girl from *Remember the Titans*, the coach’s daughter.

To understand why a game that I did not actually participate in had such an impact on my physical and emotional wellbeing, you must first understand that in the South, college football is a religion. On Saturdays, you pledge your devotion to Kirby Smart or Nick Saban or Dabo Swinney. You put on your lucky jersey and sit in your superstitious spot on the couch (because

that's where you sat when your team won the championship back in 2007). You make cheese dip in a Crock-Pot to eat in increasing amounts as your stress level and blood pressure skyrocket over the course of the day leading up to the 7 p.m. kickoff. Then a rookie receiver who was rated as a five-star prospect coming out of high school drops a game-winning pass and you yell at your TV and swear you'll never root for that team for as long as you live.

But next Saturday you're back in the same spot on the couch because you were born into this and there's no way out without disappointing everyone you know. The slogan for the Southeastern Conference is "It Just Means More." And it does. It means something more than just a football game for reasons I cannot articulate because I haven't quite figured them out yet. (Has anyone?) It means community and tradition at its core. But still, it's even more than that.

I did not choose to be a University of Georgia football fan. There have been times where I wanted to completely divorce myself from the team because it is by far the biggest and most consistent source of disappointment and heartbreak in my life. But as many times as I've said I wouldn't follow the Dawgs after they lost a game to an unranked team, I know I'm lying to myself, my friends, my family, and my Twitter followers.

My parents are both UGA fans. So are my aunt and uncle and my cousins, my mom's fiancé, and most of my friends from high school. We talk about coaches and players as if we know them personally, calling them by their first names when discussing their performances each week or the fishing trips they went on because we saw it on Instagram. If you didn't already know that the quarterback broke his thumb during spring practice, you're likely to hear it from four different people before lunch and then be asked how you think this will affect the team come fall. We discuss recruits over dinner and watch high school highlights to see who we want to put on a red and black hat during National Signing Day. Our lives revolve around the team to

the point that my cousin chose her wedding date specifically so that it wouldn't interfere with a Georgia game.

Considering the football-loving conditions I grew up in, it's no surprise that I realized I needed to be a sportswriter while on the way home from a college football game. I've known since age five that I wanted to write, but I thought I would be an author. Before first grade, I had no concrete idea of what I wanted to be. Neither of my parents had particularly interesting jobs (my mom was a medical transcriptionist, and my dad was a delivery man for Frito-Lay), so I fell back on the typical childhood fantasies. I wanted to be a mermaid like Ariel because I have red hair and enjoy swimming. Or a Rockette like the girls in the Thanksgiving Day Parade who wore Christmas-y leotards with sparkly tights. Or a bartender because I was exposed to *Coyote Ugly* way too young and thought dancing on the bar looked fun even though I didn't really understand the other expectations of the job. But when I was prompted to write a story about what I wanted to be for a first-grade writing assignment, I didn't choose any of those things. I wrote that I wanted to be like my dad.

My dad had just graduated from nursing school and now had what I considered a fun job. A boy nurse! How cool. I didn't really know what nurses did aside from help sick people and give shots, so that was the bulk of my story. I added an illustration of me in a lab coat with a needle at the end in case my descriptions weren't entirely clear and my readers needed a visual aid (I now realize that nurses do not typically wear lab coats). My story, though brief and probably inaccurate, was good enough to get me recognized as a Young Author. I had no idea what that entailed, but I got to stay back in my normal classroom while my classmates went to learn about computers or sing songs or whatever first graders do when they need a break from addition, so that I could focus on rewriting and coloring my story with a neater hand. A few

weeks later, my teacher sent me home with an invitation to an awards ceremony where all the young authors in the school would be recognized and given a special gift. Both my parents made the trip to the Springfield Elementary School gym to watch me receive a bound copy of all the chosen stories. When I held that chunky book in my little hands and flipped to the glossy printed version of my writing, a switch flipped. I don't know if it was the satisfaction of seeing something I had done look so pretty and official or if it was all the attention I got for being deemed a good writer, but after that day, I didn't want to be a nurse anymore.

Once I decided I wanted to be an author (since that's what my award told me I was), I thought I'd write children's books. I had learned to read early thanks to every member of my family answering my pleas for never-ending bedtime stories and my dad insisting I do sight word flashcards as an appetizer for any fun activity we had planned. By first grade, I was reading everything from *Junie B. Jones* to *Hank the Cowdog*. In hindsight, I should have realized I would end up a journalist since I started a newspaper for my house shortly after I decided I would be the next J.K. Rowling. *The House Blab* remains the DeMeyer household's sole publication, though it has been out of circulation for over a decade now. It covered the hottest happenings, like my dad putting up the Christmas tree or the results of my brother's football game, and it took hours to design because I used Microsoft Word and clip art. Even though I attempted to start a student newspaper at Springfield Elementary, I was still convinced fiction was the only route for me. I didn't particularly enjoy anything in the nonfiction section of the library because it was mostly biographies on people like Robert E. Lee and his horse, so I didn't voluntarily read or write it until high school.

My parents, though extremely supportive of everything I did, were wary of my dream to be an author. When I said I wanted to study creative writing in college, they gently suggested I

make writing a hobby that could be a side hustle in addition to a more lucrative career. I couldn't think of one (aside from the whole *Coyote Ugly* plan, which still lingers in the back of my mind to this day), and I dismissed their ideas of trying engineering or law or medicine. It wasn't until I returned from a four-day road trip carefully routed to hit two of the biggest college football games of the 2014 season that I restructured my career goals into what they are now. I had years of competitive gymnastics and cheerleading under my belt along with a catalog of knowledge about University of Georgia athletics, but I knew being a washed-up athlete and rabid fan wasn't enough. I started watching even more college football than I had before. I read articles on teams, coaches, players, and programs that I needed to know if I wanted to be good at this. I looked at colleges with journalism schools and strong athletic departments (if you're wondering how these criteria led me to Brown, know that I am equally confused), then did everything necessary to get there. While in college, I called and emailed any sports journalist whose contact info I could find and worked my way from freelancing for a magazine in my home county to interning at *USA TODAY*. My mom jokes that I have tunnel vision, a one-track mind that won't be redirected no matter what. In this case, I can't really argue.

Over the years, people have doubted my commitment. "You'll change your mind a million times," they'd say. "Just wait until you get to college. Then we'll see if you've stuck with it." Reporters, editors, and columnists have tried to dissuade me from following this path. They remind me, "You go to Brown! You could do *anything*." This is usually followed by the assertion that there are easier ways to make a dollar, less stressful fields out there, other jobs that won't consume your entire life and put your work in the hands of people who are more likely to tear it apart than drop a gold star in the comments section. But I always go back to something

Charlotte Wilder, a writer for *Sports Illustrated*, said to me when I called her for advice two summers ago: Only do this job if you can't see yourself doing anything else.

The days are long; the nights are late; and every assignment won't be as fun and glamorous as you think. If you can imagine yourself happy working in any other field, do that instead because this won't feel worth it. But every morning that I get up to watch football players practice as the sun rises and every night that I sit in a press box long after sane people have gone to sleep, I can't imagine myself being anywhere else. And that's how I know I'm in the right place.

Thus, proposing a thesis on women in sports media felt like a no-brainer. I knew my experiences were consistent with others', and I thought that would be an interesting way to link past and present. Over 40 years of history, progress, and challenges were recorded in the interviews I conducted with women who shaped the industry through court cases and viral videos. My narrative is just a tiny piece of that, but together, our stories offer a glimpse into what it's like to be a woman in sports media today.

Chapter 1: Barriers to Entry

We were considered to be invaders, invaders of a place that we shouldn't be [in]. — Melissa Ludtke, former *Sports Illustrated* reporter

I was 20 years old the first time I was denied access to a Major League Baseball (MLB) clubhouse. At 3 a.m., a heap of reporters sprinted from the elevator to the heavy metal door that separated the Atlanta Braves' locker room from the long, echoey hallway that stretched past the Delta Sky Club and the visitors' locker room underneath SunTrust Park. A 15-inning game had just ended, and everyone was racing to get quotes, write postgame recaps, and go home. All the other writers — mostly middle-aged men who had been covering baseball longer than I had been alive — were immediately let in without a second glance from the security guard, but I got stopped. Maybe it was because I looked young. Young enough to be the daughter of some writer, coach, or even player. Maybe it was because the security guard hadn't recognized me. It was only my second time ever at the ballpark, and the other reporters were there almost every day. Maybe it was because I was the only woman in the group, and there had been stories of female fans trying to sneak in to restricted areas to get closer to the athletes. I didn't have much time to ponder why I had been halted because it was only a temporary holdup. I had a press pass and was accompanied by a seasoned male reporter who assured the security guard I was allowed in. But for a second I felt like I had traveled back in time.

Long before I started looking around press boxes and wondering why I was one of the only women there, a tiny group of female sportswriters who were the first to take on the job did exactly the same. As the only woman in America covering Major League Baseball in the 1970s Melissa Ludtke remembers “a lot of fedoras” and waiting outside the New York Yankees locker room after the 1977 World Series. Despite being a credentialed reporter for *Sports Illustrated*, she wasn't allowed in the victors' clubhouse because MLB commissioner Bowie Kuhn had

banned female sports reporters from going inside the locker room at Yankee Stadium. Ludtke stood outside for an hour and 45 minutes, waiting for World Series Most Valuable Player Reggie Jackson to come out for an interview, but when he finally emerged after answering countless questions from male reporters, he told her he was too exhausted to answer her questions. She missed the material necessary to write an article while her competitors had everything they needed to write stories for the following day's paper.

It wasn't the first time a female sportswriter's reporting had been hindered because of her gender. However, Time Inc., the parent company behind *Sports Illustrated*, took legal action to ensure that it would be the last time the MLB could deny a woman with a press pass access to a clubhouse.

Over four decades after a 26-year-old Ludtke became the face of a civil case that would change the landscape of sports media forever, I briefly looked up at the same locked door I thought had already been forced open. Aside from 40 years of history and one monumental court ruling in the case of *Ludtke v. Kuhn*, there wasn't much that separated Ludtke and me in that moment, but I felt her impact when the security guard finally handed back my press pass and waved me into the locker room.

The initial issue was nudity. That's what male writers, coaches, athletes, fans, owners, and commissioners claimed, at least. According to Ludtke, the nakedness was "a trope" used to distract the public, who assumed the shower areas in the clubhouses were exposed, from the reality that women could enter locker rooms for interviews without encountering any naked bodies. "If it was about the reality, why would I also be kept out of the clubhouse in the 45-minute time period when the men were there between batting practice and when the game began?" Ludtke asked me. She emphasized that players don't change out of their uniforms

during that time, and yet she was still denied entry. It had nothing to do with nudity. “It had to do with exclusion, and it had to do with just the notion of us invading something that the men thought was their territory” (Ludtke interview).

A quick review of past efforts to bar women from sports media further undermines the argument about locker room nudity. For many years, women were not allowed in dugouts or on the field during pregame batting practice. They were told to sit in the grandstands and convince athletes to come over for interviews while male reporters could speak freely with the baseball players on the field. They could not even eat with the other male sportswriters. Instead, their food was brought to them separately, or a table was set up with a sign that said “Lady’s Pavilion.” Ludtke recalled being thrown out of a bar at Comiskey Park because she was mistaken for a male writer’s secretary or girlfriend. Even when her position as a reporter was clarified, she was not allowed in.

No one is naked in any of these spaces, and yet women were excluded from all of them until they demanded access. By the time Ludtke arrived, the locker room was “the last place of exclusion,” and many men fought tooth and nail to keep it that way. The ESPN documentary *Let Them Wear Towels* features a clip of *New York Post* reporter Maury Allen in which he claims he is afraid that “the impact of women in sports will diminish the joy of the sport, diminish the joy of the athletes, and the athletes will become very, very inhibited. I think that will be a detrimental thing to everybody’s entertainment.”

Other male reporters knew that nudity wasn’t the reason women weren’t allowed in clubhouses, but “they never pointed it out in their stories,” Ludtke said. She noted that

They made jokes about it, jokes about me. It was all revolving around this message. Not every single man but the majority of them literally were fed the lines that the baseball commissioner’s office wanted fed, and they reiterated them and regurgitated them. They knew better. The commissioner had this big

mythology that baseball provided ‘separate accommodations for women reporters.’ If any man reporter had ever called me, I would have told him right off the bat that there’s no team that provided me with any separate accommodation *ever* (Ludtke interview).

During the sixth game of the 1977 World Series, the commissioner’s office said it would provide Ludtke a male escort to get players from inside the locker room so that she could speak with them. But there was no separate accommodation or other room for her to use. She “was squished against a concrete wall standing outside in a mob of people outside the locker room. Even the few players that came out, they couldn’t hear me, and I couldn’t hear them. That was the separate accommodation. And no reporters ever reported that didn’t exist! It was just so much mythology that kept going around about this that was really meant to be fear tactics.”

Those same men worked National Basketball Association (NBA) locker rooms with female reporters and knew women could work in those spaces without any problems, but “they didn’t want to tell the story accurately. They wanted to basically tell the story in a way that they hoped would keep us out,” Ludtke said during our interview. She added

Just me — being one single woman reporter, it’s amazing — sent fears through the baseball fraternity. There would be 50 of us the next year, and God knows what we’d do then. It was very much an idea throughout this, starting with whether we could eat with them, whether we could be in the press box. Each of these steps was meant to make it more difficult and challenging and with the hope that we would go away.

But Ludtke and the handful of female sportswriters trying to dismantle the boys’ club stood their ground, and on September 25, 1978, the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York ruled in Ludtke’s favor. There was no league-wide policy — the ruling only applied to the opening of the locker room at Yankee Stadium — and some teams remained adamantly opposed to women in the locker room. It took player protests and newspaper articles documenting the resistance for the rest of the MLB teams to eventually follow suit in the 1980s.

The impact of Ludtke's case is evident each time I enter a locker room or see other women get access to spaces that we were previously excluded from, yet obstacles still remain. Annual reports published by The Women's Media Center (WMC) and The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) indicate that gender diversity in sports is much lower than in other newspaper sections.

According to the 2019 WMC report, only 10% of sports stories that ran in print were written by women. The next closest category — technology and media — notes that 33% of stories were written by women, demonstrating that the gender gap in sports coverage is much larger than even the next closest section. Female reporters fared slightly better online, as 21% of digital sports content came from women. Fourteen percent of wire stories (the articles consisting of a brief recap and final scores, which the Associated Press publishes immediately after the final buzzer) were written by female reporters. The only subject in which women produced more content than men across all media was lifestyle and leisure. Women also amassed more bylines on health, entertainment, and education in some of the aforementioned categories, but not in all three. Breakdowns of demographics by newsroom position showed all aspects of sports media remain overwhelmingly white and male.

Organizations like the Associate Press Sports Editors (APSE) have taken heed of this lopsided data and have requested that TIDES assess the organizations' racial and gender hiring practices. After evaluating 75 news organizations, TIDES issued a report card in May 2018. In order to receive an A in both fields, newsroom staffers had to reflect the demographics of the general population. This meant 30% of staffers had to be people of color, and 45% had to be female. Though sports news desks earned a B+ for racial diversity, they received an F for the sixth year in a row for gender equity. Sports desks received a failing grade for hiring in every

gendered category except for assistant sports editors, in which they got a C-. The combined grade of a D+ was the lowest TIDES has ever issued.

New Orleans Saints reporter Amie Just is on the APSE Diversity Committee but finds it “frustrating” to hear members talking about wanting more diversity because there is a habit of hiring candidates who are already familiar. “It’s hard to make strides when you don’t look outside of your small pool of people that you know and ask them,” she said in an interview with me. “We need to break that.” She equated finding women of color in newsrooms to finding a needle in a haystack, a sentiment that Carolina Panthers reporter Jourdan Rodrigue shared when discussing the slow arrival of intersectionality to newsrooms. “That’s something I’ve been incredibly disappointed in in almost every newsroom, especially older publications,” she said. “If I think that I’m lonely and isolated, imagine what a young female journalist of color thinks.” As the first female Carolina Panthers beat reporter that *The Charlotte Observer* ever had, there were times where Rodrigue “felt like the only reason that mattered was so that [the newspaper] could say” they had a female writer. Because of this, she said she often thinks, “Gosh, if I barely had a shot here to get this position, what would a young woman of color think about her chances of even breaking into it? It’s deterring people at the door almost because of the vibe that is put off almost, and I think that is shameful, and it needs to be fixed” (Rodrigue interview).

Women currently working in the industry also encounter signs of male dominance. Lydia Morris¹ was not granted a credential to a National Football League (NFL) playoff game because she had previously reported the team for the sexist actions of a parking lot attendant. The employee had denied her access to the media parking space on the basis that she “didn’t look like a member of the media” even though she had parking and press passes. Without a credential,

¹ Name changed at the request of the journalist.

Morris ended up watching the game from the stands and writing her articles on her cellphone because she was not allowed to bring her laptop into the stadium. Rodrigue experienced a similar situation early in her career when a locker-room attendant did not believe she was allowed to enter, despite her credential stating her access. She was only allowed in after speaking with the Carolina Panthers' President, who made a point of emphasizing Rodrigue's importance in front of the locker-room attendant.

Press areas at athletic events also send messages about who is expected to inhabit the space. Just pointed out that the size of the women's bathroom in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome press box is much smaller than the men's. The women have a single stall, while the men have two restrooms that multiple people can go into at once. Because of this, Just often misses parts of games while waiting for the bathroom. Prior to a sign change — the women's bathroom was previously a family restroom before the label on the door was switched — there were no spaces for women. At the Southeastern Conference's spring meetings held last May, Just encountered multiple seasoned college football and basketball reporters who told her she was the first female media member they had ever seen at the meetings outside of university employees. Because media outlets are only granted one credential for the event, it often goes to the most veteran reporter, all of whom had been men until Just became the second woman ever to cover Louisiana State University football for a newspaper.

Assumptions about a female reporter's identity or position can be another hurdle to overcome when out in the field. While she was freelancing for the Arizona Diamondbacks, an older male sportswriter was confused as to why Rodrigue was in the press box because he thought she was the young woman who had just sung the National Anthem. During the two summers I spent interning in sports media, I was mistaken for a nanny, a player's girlfriend, a

player's wife, someone's daughter, and a rapid fan while covering baseball games. Those misunderstandings are typically resolved with a quick flash of a press pass, but each time a male presence is required to confirm that I do have the credentials to enter a press-only space, I'm reminded of the extra demands that female sports reporters have to meet in order to be afforded the same respect and acceptance as our male counterparts.

Chapter 2: Can you name the defensive coordinator's blood type?

Whether we like it or not, we're representatives of all the women in the industry. It's not that the guys can get away with messing up every time they mess up, but when we mess up, people are going to say it's because we're women whether it's accurate or not. For the guys, they're just going to say they messed up. — Jori Epstein, NFL reporter for *USA TODAY*

Barriers to entry go beyond physical limitations like being denied credentials or having to wait outside locker rooms. The sense of exclusivity extends to challenging women's knowledge of sports when they express interest in or claim allegiance to games, teams, or athletes. Among women working in the industry, the random questions that men pose in a sort of "What's the password?" manner are known as "The Quiz." For International Women's Day in 2017, Tess Quinlan, a manager of digital content at NBC Sports, wrote "#YesAllWomen in Sports," an entire article that details how absolutely ridiculous "The Quiz" is when put into context. As she states:

As a woman, you know that a man would never be subjected to this in a serious context. You are acutely aware that this is not a joke. There is an expectation that you must answer the basic, idiotic questions to show your knowledge and that is the most frustrating thing of all. If someone tells you they're an accountant, you don't ask them to debit an account. If someone tells you they're a history teacher, you don't demand they list all the presidents. You don't make them prove that they are knowledgeable in their field. You take their word for it.

The world got a front row seat to an example of a female sportswriter's expertise being challenged when a clip from a press conference went viral. In October 2017, Jourdan Rodrigue was covering a Carolina Panthers' press conference for *The Charlotte Observer*. She had been on the beat for about a year.

During the conference, she asked Cam Newton, the Panthers' starting quarterback, about the physicality his receivers were displaying while running their routes in practice. When she mentioned routes, a smirk started to creep across Newton's face. It spread into a smile

reminiscent of the Cheshire Cat as he responded to her question with, “It’s funny to hear a female talk about routes like...[full toothy grin] it’s funny.”

Rodrigue remembers the moment vividly, recalling that the frenzy began when someone from *Sports Illustrated* tweeted a video from the conference. She had not planned to post about it at all, but the clip quickly garnered attention, and everyone who watched it expected comments from both sides.

Newton didn’t offer any explanation for why he found it funny that a woman asked a technical question about the team she was covering, but that didn’t stop the media from jumping on the 20-second exchange and turning it into national news. Sportscasters called Newton out for the sexist nature of the remark, Dannon, the yogurt company, cut its sponsorship ties with him, and female sports reporters across the country took to Twitter to drown out the trolls who tried to downplay it as a joke. The Panthers issued an official apology, and Newton posted a video expressing regret for what he had said. Rodrigue tweeted “I don't think it's ‘funny’ to be a female and talk about routes. I think it's my job.” She followed by a screenshot from the iPhone Notes app saying she was “dismayed” by Newton’s comment because it “not only belittled me but countless other women before me and beside me who work in similar jobs.”

Then someone dug through Rodrigue’s Twitter and found three racist tweets from a few years before the incident, one of which included the N word. Rodrigue tweeted her own apology. More articles followed, debating who had committed the worse offense and asking if her tweets should be taken into account when discussing Newton’s comments. No definite resolution was reached.

Two years later, Rodrigue recounted it to me as

an incredibly difficult experience. But it was something that I think on a private and micro-aggressive level, so many women go through behind the scenes on a

daily basis, that on a very small level, I was glad that people could see what it's like on a daily basis for some women who cover the sport. ... A journalist never wants to become the story. I just wanted to do my job. I woke up that morning wanting to do my job and feeling thankful to be in this position, and after that day it took me a really long time to not dread going to do my job. But at the same time, I had such a wave of people — young women, older women, women who have been through so much, have been physically harassed at work, seriously harmed or stalked or disrespected in the workplace — reach out to me, and they really kept me going at times because there were times where I didn't want to do this anymore. I wanted to disappear. ... I was so naïve to a lot of things before. I had experienced some bad workplace situations and some bad mentor situations and people generally being inappropriate, guys being idiots, everything before that. But never to a point where it became a story, which I think was the worst part for me. I want to do my job; I don't want to *be* the job. ... All I could do was to just keep showing up. I had no control over this, other than my own actions every single day moving forward.

I have never been publicly challenged in the way Jourdan was, but I was frequently quizzed by male classmates in high school. They'd prompt me with little questions and commands to see if I really knew what I was talking about or if I was faking an interest in football to get attention. Who's the offensive coordinator at Michigan State? How many yards did Todd Gurley rush for against Clemson? Name Oregon's front seven and at least one backup.

Most of the time, I could thwart the doubters. I follow college football religiously and have since I was a child. But when I would admit I didn't know the social security number of the wide receiver who scored the winning touchdown in the 1986 national championship, nothing else mattered. Because I couldn't recall every random factoid a boy was demanding, I wasn't a real fan. My quizzer had the authority to determine my authenticity, and my gender already put me at a disadvantage. It didn't matter that I could rattle off every gymnast who has ever won an Olympic gold medal for Team USA or that I had studied the x's and o's of Texas Tech's offense to understand what "air raid" meant. I was a girl and thus didn't know enough to actually discuss the game with the guys.

I thought maybe once I became official — a professional working at a respected publication with credentials to get me unlimited access to the players and coaches — those interactions would end. People would take my word for what it was worth when I said that the Chicago Bears' had some of the best linebackers in the league. If a newspaper trusted me enough to pay me to cover a football game, surely that meant I was capable and qualified.

But no, readers and tweeters and fans of any team or player that I mentioned weren't convinced. According to them, I was brought in as a “diversity hire,” just a body to make the newsroom stats look better during annual reports on equality. (If this were in fact the case, sports media would not consistently do so poorly in yearly reviews.) Their thought process seemed to be “She hasn't ever played football, so how could she possibly know what she's talking about?” Never mind that we go on overlooking the fact that men often commentate on women's sports that they've never participated in.

A mistake in an article about Georgia football that I wrote last summer confirmed a principle I knew I was facing would be applied at every opportunity; I would have to always be on. Absolutely right, no room for error, every i dotted and t crossed. I misidentified a player in the article — put him on the defensive line when he actually played in the backfield — and got raked over the coals by everyone but my editors, who hadn't even noticed. Commenters questioned why I had even been sent to cover SEC Media Days, one of the biggest events of the college football offseason, and suggested I get back in the kitchen or cover something more suited to my abilities. Since I've dedicated my entire life to following college football, I'm not exactly sure what that would be, and they weren't explicit about which section I should try instead. I was heartbroken. I beat myself up over it for days until I could get back to the office to

apologize to my editor, who shrugged it off. “Happens all the time,” he said. “Consider it a lesson learned.”

Yes, it does happen all the time. But when other writers do it — those whose don’t have to worry about their every move being scrutinized because readers feel like they are looking in a mirror and thus trust their reflection — it isn’t a big deal. They might even get a friendly email from a reader pointing out the typo, so that the writer isn’t further embarrassed.

The same cannot be said for female reporters, who are dismissed as ditzy, dumb, or uninformed if we so much as make a typo in a tweet. I can’t count how many times I’ve heard a male analyst make a mistake on air without any backlash. Viewers assume it was a slip of the tongue, just a lapse in memory because *of course* he meant to say “Missouri” instead of “Mississippi.” No angry, I-told-you-so tweets necessary.

In “Double Standard: Why Women Have Trouble Getting Jobs in Local Television Sports,” Mary Lou Sheffer and Brad Shultz write that “women sportscasters are still held to a higher standard because there is a greater attention to their true abilities.” *Sportista* points out that because the majority male audience of most sporting events is not used to seeing a female broadcaster, they are more attuned to everything she does and thus key in on any slipup. Because of the constant suspicion that male audiences feel toward female sports reporters, Markovits and Albertson assert that women working in the industry “feel that they must, from day one, out-perform their male counterparts to stand a chance at eventually being accepted as legitimate” (177). Former National Hockey League (NHL) senior vice president of broadcasting John Shannon agreed with that point, saying that female broadcasters “need to be ’20 percent better’ than their male counterparts to be accepted as credible journalists by a largely male audience” (177).

“Women just aren’t as qualified as male candidates” is another argument often tossed around when trying to justify the lack of women in sports media, but that is just as easily dismantled as the idea that “women don’t care as much about sports.” *Sportista* cites a study by Marie Hardin, Jason Genovese, and Nan Yu of 216 subjects who worked as sports reporters, anchors, or directors on television sports news teams in large (Top 50) markets. Their research proved that women were actually more qualified than their male counterparts, stating, “The findings showed that 94.1 percent of female sports broadcasters surveyed in this study reported having completed journalism-related internships while in college, while only 69.2 percent of males confirmed the same” (172). However, being more qualified on paper did not give female reporters any sort of professional advantages. Instead, “they confronted skepticism about their being qualified to garner any type of sports broadcasting job in any position” (172).

Thus, this need that women feel to be better, to achieve more, and to work harder than men vying for the same jobs does not stem from some imagined gender imbalance. It comes from reading data like the annual reports published by the WMC and TIDES, which prove that sports continues to lag behind all other newspaper sections in terms of gender diversity. It comes from watching less qualified candidates get hired because their base knowledge of sports is assumed to be higher due to their gender. It comes from being told over and over that women aren’t qualified enough to talk about routes or formations or strategies.

Chapter 3: Locker-Room Talk

Every woman who's ever been in a locker room knows you've gotta smile and laugh. You've gotta be a little blind and a little deaf. You just ignore things. — Christine Brennan in *Let Them Wear Towels*.

On October 9th, 2016, everyone in America had something to say about locker-room talk. What the phrase meant, what kind of language it encompassed, who could partake in it, and who was or wasn't allowed to be offended by it. The discussion wasn't centered around sports; it was spurred by Donald Trump's use of the term when downplaying sexist remarks he had made in 2005. But the specific wording he used was accurate. The vulgar language Trump was recorded saying is not far from the comments that female sports reporters have dealt with for the past 50 years.

In *Let Them Wear Towels*, some of the first women allowed in the locker rooms of professional teams recall the names and insults thrown at them by fans, players, and coaches. Robin Herman saved a letter that called her a “harlot” and that claimed “if there had been any real men in that locker room, you would have been kicked out on your prostititional ass.” Others shared stories of getting flashed, having towels snapped at them, getting water poured on them, and being carried or dragged out of locker rooms. Lesley Visser, the first female NFL beat writer ever, wrote in *Sometimes You Have to Cross When It Says Don't Walk: A Memoir of Breaking Barriers* that athletes would disregard her as a professional and ask her out to “dinner, drinks, or a romp in the hotel room” (45). On one occasion, Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Jim McMahon asked her to come to his locker so he could give her a Christmas present. Inside the gift box was a black negligee (51).

Though athletes and coaches no longer physically torment female reporters like they did in the 1970s and 80s, unwanted romantic and sexual advances still frequently occur. While trying

to get in touch with an athlete for an article, Sarah Burns² had to relay messages through a different man who tried to initiate meetings outside of professional boundaries. She said the man answered her calls by addressing her as “Mrs.” followed by his last name on multiple occasions, regularly told her that they should go on dates, and often said that she should marry him. He would group text her and the player she was trying to report on saying things like “Sarah, if you go on a date with this player he’ll tell you all of his secrets, and we’ll give you the story.” When she would hang up on him or mute their calls, he would claim it was all a joke (Burns interview).

During a recent NFL Combine, Burns encountered a coach at a bar in the early hours of the morning. She had never met him and didn’t know his name, but he asked her what they were doing that night as he moved closer to her. She replied, “What do you mean what I am doing? It’s four in the morning. We’re all going to sleep.” The coach then “very suggestively” repeated his question. When he went to the bathroom, she looked him up on the team’s website. His biography said he was married and had children. “I didn’t go home with him, so I can’t be a hundred percent sure of his intentions,” she said during our interview. “But I’m a hundred percent sure he wasn’t asking that question to the men around me.”

A similar situation happened to me while I was interning at a newspaper one summer. I was looking up at the menu over the concession stand, trying to decide between chicken nuggets and a tiny personal pizza, when he spoke up. “You know you won’t be able to do this job and have a family, right?” The statement, disguised as a question, caught me off guard because my future as a member of a family was not on my mind that day in SunTrust Park. “It’s a good thing I don’t want a family then,” I replied.

² Name changed at request of journalist.

It's true. I've never wanted children and don't plan on having them, but I didn't expect to discuss that while waiting in line for overpriced ballpark food. I was trying to appear calm and collected even though I was having an internal crisis. It was my first time covering a Major League Baseball game (actually my first time covering any baseball game...and my first time *attending* an MLB game), and I had no idea what the hell I was doing. I hadn't been given an assignment before getting to the park because "we'll figure it out when you get there." I understand the basics of baseball but had to keep googling what ERA (Earned Run Average) meant and why it's important.

But that didn't matter at the moment because Brad³ felt the need to tell me I couldn't be a mother and a sportswriter at the same time. That was over a year ago, and I still have no idea why he felt the need to say anything. Maybe because he was also young and struggled with balancing work and personal life as a new baseball beat writer. Those reporters are constantly on the road, following teams that play multiple times a week for a total of 162 games a season. It would be hard for anyone to have a life outside of an MLB press box, yet somehow I doubt the topic of families comes up often among the guys considering he didn't ask my male co-intern, Max, anything about his future as a husband and father.

Brad's question becomes even more interesting when considering what happened next. We got our expensive but subpar food and went back up to the press box to await the first pitch. If you're covering an MLB game, you should get to the park about three hours before the game starts to hang out in the clubhouse while the players mill around. Sometimes you get some good sound bites that make for an interesting pregame story. Other times the shortstop you need to interview is playing *Fortnite* in the back and refuses to come out to his locker. It's a lot of

³ Name changed.

standing around (but no sitting — you can't sit on any of the plush leather chairs or even lounge on the edge of the pool table because some PR person will come by and yell at you, even though the players weren't planning to use the furniture) plus waiting and chatting with the other reporters who are probably trying to talk to the same guys you are.

So in the press box, Brad and I exchange more small talk because there isn't much else to do. He's only a few years older than I am and was hired as a staff writer after finishing his internship at the newspaper⁴ a summer before I started. He was supposed to be my mentor that day. Show me the ropes, answer all my questions, help me figure out what stories to pursue since I was only pretending to have a clue of what was going on. He did all that, and I trusted him. I didn't realize that his questions were indirect ways to find out if I was single and what my social life was like.

“Is that your boyfriend?” he asked, referring to a picture of me with a friend on my Twitter. That one was the most obvious. I should've known. But I answered honestly, though I have learned to always lie when questions about my relationship status arise. My fake boyfriend and his artificial backstory have helped me shut down unwanted advances and awkward interactions before they even get off the ground. Had I said I was unavailable, the conversation probably would've ended. Instead, Brad tried to find ways to ask me out without directly asking me out. I didn't recognize it until I called my co-intern on my drive home that night, nearly shouting in my car as I got more worked up over what had happened.

Brad asked me what I had done in Atlanta since moving there a few weeks ago. I said I hadn't gotten out much and wanted to see the pandas at the zoo. He asked when I was going. I didn't have a set date in mind and could tell that he wanted an invite. But I didn't want to extend

⁴ Name of publication left out for my protection.

one, so I just replied that I wasn't sure. This process repeated itself with every museum, restaurant, and movie I said I wanted to check out. Looking back, it felt like playing a game of dodgeball. He'd throw something out there that we should do together, I'd lean to the left or scurry to the right to avoid making any sort of commitment outside work. I didn't want to be rude or sit in silence for nine innings, so I kept the conversation up, asking him questions about his family and hobbies.

Hours later, when the last strike crossed the mound and the postgame stories got published for the night owls to read, he offered to drive me back to my car. Members of the Baseball Writers Association of America have a special parking lot at SunTrust Park (which has recently been renamed Truist Park). It's covered, well-lit, and a short walk from the home plate gates. Writers who don't cover baseball regularly have temporary spots in The Boy Scout Lot. It's a hike from the stadium, downhill and out of sight. At nighttime, there are only a few streetlights around, and most of the parking spaces are completely dark.

It was after midnight and pitch black, aside from the few stadium lights left on. I accepted Brad's invite, thinking it was an act of chivalry. Before we pulled up to my car, he asked what my plans were for Sunday. I froze, then moved my hand towards the door handle. The door was locked, but I could have thrown it open if necessary. "I don't know," I said. "I might be going to get my nails done with my friend from school."

"Would you want to get drinks?" he asked.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have been surprised, given his subtle attempts to coordinate a date between us all night. But I thought I was just a mentee in this relationship, so the question caught me off guard.

“Are you allowed to do that?” was the first thing I could think to ask as I tried to stall for time. I didn’t feel like I could just flat-out say “no,” since we would be working together for the rest of the summer, and I felt a little trapped in his car.

“I probably shouldn’t be buying you alcohol since you’re only 20, but I don’t think that’s a big deal,” he said.

“No, I mean go out with an intern,” I replied, hoping that would remind him what kind of relationship we were supposed to have.

“Oh, I don’t think that matters.”

“I don’t know,” I said, before saying it another five times. I couldn’t think of any other words and just wanted to get out.

“You can tell me no if you don’t want to,” he said.

But I didn’t feel like I could. “I don’t know,” I said again, finally grabbing my bag and unbuckling my seatbelt.

“Okay, have fun getting your nails done. Stay out of trouble.”

He drove off, leaving me alone in that dark, deserted parking lot. I locked all my doors and immediately called Max. I needed to tell someone, and he was the only person who would understand without me filling in all the background details of who Brad was. As the phone rang, I bounced my leg and gripped the steering wheel. Had Brad only been nice to me because he wanted something more? Was he truly acting as a mentor and trying to show me the ropes, or was he taking advantage of the imbalanced power dynamic?

A muffled “hello?” interrupted the rapid stream of questions.

“Maxwell!!!!” I screamed as soon as he picked up, not caring that it was after 1 a.m. and there was a possibility I had woken him up. “Brad just asked me out! He asked me to get drinks! What the fuck am I supposed to do?!”

“Whoa. That’s crazy,” he replied, two phrases he would repeat throughout my recount of the day. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t know what to say! I didn’t want to say no and be rude. But I don’t want to go on a date with him!” My volume increased with each sentence. “But we’ll have to work other baseball games together this summer! What was I supposed to do? When he asked if one of my friends was my boyfriend, I said no. I didn’t even realize.”

“Huh. That’s wild,” Max laughed. Not in a way that made me feel bad or guilty or stupid, but in a way that signaled the absurdity of the situation. He apologized, both for his reaction and for what had happened. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. He probably got the message.”

Two days later, I got a text from Brad. Apparently he hadn’t picked up any of my negative signals because his suggestion for drinks had turned into a dinner invite. I panicked and texted an older friend who worked at CNN for advice. “Don’t lie and say you’re a lesbian,” she advised. “I’ve tried that, and it doesn’t work. Just be up-front and say you want to keep your relationship professional.” It worked. The next time I was assigned to help him cover a Braves game, he sat several feet away and didn’t speak to me until I needed help writing an article.

A year later, we unexpectedly ran into each other while covering a game several states away. I was interning at a different, larger paper and had asked to go to an MLB game to get out of the office. I was supposed to meet Gabe, one of the main MLB writers, at the game, and we’d figure out some sidebar for me to work on while he wrote the main column.

I arrived at the ballpark a few hours before the first pitch to pick up my credential, but the box office hadn't opened yet. The whole stadium was a ghost town, and as I sat on a nearby curb swatting away a wasp that wouldn't leave me alone I wondered if I had read the schedule incorrectly. A quick text conversation with Gabe confirmed I was on time, though the Nationals could be slow on press passes. I relaxed a little when he assured me he was on the way, but just as my heart rate gradually slowed to a less concerning speed, my phone lit up with a text that shoved me closer to full-blown panic. Gabe's car had broken down, and though he was hopeful that State Farm's roadside assistance would help him get to the stadium eventually, I could read the signs the Universe was sending.

Five minutes later my suspicions were confirmed: his engine was completely blown. I tried to stay optimistic, hoping that he would still arrive in time for pre-game interviews. We had hours until the first pitch, and the clubhouse wouldn't open for another 45 minutes. When an employee finally appeared behind the box office window, I claimed my pass and told myself I'd be fine. I just had to sit in our assigned spots behind home plate and wait.

As middle-aged white men filed into the seats around me, I pretended to do work on my laptop. In reality, I was frantically messaging all my editors to let them know Gabe had not yet arrived and that the probability of his presence was decreasing by the minute. And then I heard a familiar voice coming from behind my right shoulder, and it was like the clouds parted.

"Tess?" Robert⁵ said. I turned and saw a whole row of men I had worked with while covering Braves games for the Atlanta paper a year before and silently thanked the Universe for throwing me a life preserver. I wouldn't have to wait for Gabe alone! I had a whole crew of reporters who knew the ins and outs of the game, both teams, and the new pitcher the Braves

⁵ Name changed.

were debuting that night! I was so relieved to have any kind of support that I ran over to Robert and gave him a hug. Though we had only covered one game together in Atlanta, a rain delay and extra innings had kept us at the ballpark until 3 a.m. Unlike Brad, who also seemed excited to see me, Robert was older than my dad and hadn't done anything to make me feel uneasy the night we'd worked together. I moved my laptop and book bag to sit near Robert and even struck up conversation with Brad, figuring the awkwardness that resulted from me rejecting his drinks invite a summer ago had faded. We took selfies together to send back to my former editors in Atlanta.

"I don't remember you being this pale," Robert said while we waited for the locker room to open for pregame interviews.

"I have red hair. What do you expect? I'm always pale," I replied.

"I don't know. I just don't remember you looking like this."

I scrunched my nose. I didn't think I looked that different from the last time we had seen each other.

Exactly three hours before the first pitch, a team employee announced to the press box that both clubhouses were now open. Without Gabe, I was left to rely on the guys from Atlanta. So when Robert offered to show me the way down to the players' lockers after I filled him in on the car catastrophe, I assumed he was acting as a mentor and followed him to the elevator.

It was just the two of us in that tiny metal box. I was looking up at myself in the mirrored ceiling when he started talking about my clothes. I had chosen a pair of white jeans and a black top because most of my work dresses didn't fit the MLB dress code. (They weren't particularly short but did hit above my knee, which was not allowed in the press box. This rule didn't seem to apply to men, who often wore shorts that did not cover their knees, but I didn't want to push any

boundaries on my first day at the ballpark.) “Your outfit is different,” Robert said. “You had on that romper thing last time.” He had teased me relentlessly for the romper I wore a year ago, but it hadn’t come across as flirtatious at the time. I looked down and agreed. “I decided not to wear any more rompers to baseball games cause I was tired of having the fashion police on my case,” I joked. “You look good. Those pants...that’s why you look different. I couldn’t tell you looked like this when you had on the romper.” I looked down at my sparkly gold sandals (which did not fit the MLB dress code because open-toed shoes are not allowed in the press box) and tried to deflect his comment by making another joke about rompers. He told me I looked older than I had last summer. I reminded him that it was only a year ago, and I was still pretty young at 21. When the elevator finally opened at the bottom floor, I let him out first, so I wouldn’t be walking with my back to him. My mind raced with questions as we walked into the clubhouse, but I tried not to show how rattled I was. Where was Gabe? When would he get here? Who should I interview? What was I even supposed to write? What if Robert kept on acting like he had in the elevator?

I stepped aside to call Gabe but didn’t think of telling him about what had just occurred. I needed to figure out what I was expected to write, because disappointing the editors who had given me the opportunity to cover the game was not an option. I felt like there wasn’t any time to immediately deal with Robert’s behavior, and I focused instead on taking over Gabe’s assignment since he wouldn’t be able to make it to the game at all. The added pressure of covering a huge baseball story for a national newspaper without the help of the expert I was supposed to be learning from made my eyes burn with stress tears, but there’s no crying in baseball. So I went into the locker room and did the only thing I could think of: I asked Robert for help.

I felt guilty for continuing to talk to the man who had made me feel so uncomfortable minutes earlier, but I didn't know any of the other reporters well enough to feel comfortable asking for the amount of help and guidance I needed. There weren't any other women writing about the game (aside from one other female intern who was with NBC), and I thought Robert would get the memo when I lied about having a boyfriend in response to his questions about my relationship status.

He didn't. From the first pitch to the final strike, Robert casually invited me to bars, restaurants, museums, and even tried to invite himself to a drag show I said I wanted to attend. He asked if I was covering the other two games in the series, and when I said I wasn't, he suggested we do something together after he got finished writing the next night. I said I had weekend plans with friends, but he encouraged me to ditch them since he would only be in town for a couple days.

When he started eating a Quest Bar around the seventh inning, I said that I liked the cookie dough flavor. "That's why you look different," he said. "You've been eating better and working out, huh?" I told him my diet and exercise habits had not changed.

He told me I looked cold when the sun went down and offered me his jacket. Like all his other advances, I declined, even though I had chill bumps, because I knew that putting it on might send a message I didn't want to.

When I finally finished my article and packed up to leave around midnight, he gave me a high-five and extended one last dinner invite. I politely declined and said I didn't need any help getting home. By the time I flopped on my bed, I felt drained, though I wasn't sure if it was from the stress of writing a highly-anticipated story on something I knew little about or from the amount of energy I'd exerted skirting Robert's comments. I replayed the events of the night over

in my head and felt grimy (though I had already taken a shower), but I still didn't think anything of note had occurred. It took a conversation with a friend who was completely removed from the situation to prompt me into Googling "sexual harassment in the workplace" that night.

What followed was the worst kind of light bulb moment, like snatching off a pair of rose-colored glasses. I had tried to minimize the sexual harassment over the years, excusing it as a joke or an offhand comment that I should shrug off, but now that I knew what it looked, sounded, and felt like, I couldn't stop myself from seeing it everywhere. I still catch myself looking back on those nights and wondering if there was something I did or said that made those men think I wanted something more than professional guidance, but then I remember something Visser wrote in her memoir about her locker-room and game-day experiences: "There will be times when you do everything right and someone will still make you feel like a creep, like something dirty or unworthy" (54).

The only relief was in talking with other women who had been in similar situations (which, as it turns out, is all of them) or writing it down to resolve some of the guilt I felt for not speaking out against the misogyny and inappropriate workplace behavior in the moment.

Chapter Four: Social Media

*This is why we don't hire any females unless we need our c**k sucked or our food cooked* — A tweet read to sports radio host Julie DiCaro in the YouTube video “#MoreThanMean — Women in Sports ‘Face’ Harassment”

“Sarah Spain sounds like a nagging wife on TV today.”

“Sarah Spain is just a scrub muffin.”

“One of the players should beat you to death with their hockey stick like the whore you are.”

“You need to be hit in the head with a hockey puck and killed.”

Those are some of the tweets read in “#MoreThanMean — Women in Sports ‘Face’ Harassment,” a viral YouTube video posted by Just Not Sports in April 2016. In it, random men read tweets that unnamed Twitter users directed at sports radio host Julie DiCaro and ESPN reporter Sarah Spain. The video begins with the men reading mild jabs, but the comments get increasingly hostile. Their discomfort is evident, and one man admits “I’m having trouble looking at you when I’m saying these things.” Spain just gives a curt “mmmhmm.” This is, of course, the exact message the creators were hoping to send when filming the clips.

Forty years ago, the language used to harass women was drastically different. Though Ludtke was in her mid-twenties when she started gaining national attention for suing MLB commissioner Bowie Kuhn, she was consistently “called a gal, a girl, a damsel, a wench.” Ludtke acknowledged that those insults seem “very tame” compared to the terms used today, but “they had the similar effect then that some of these other ways that have been escalated do now ... that was another way of just pulling us down a notch and taking our sense of inequality away from us” (Ludtke interview).

Before social media and smartphones, sending hateful messages required a stamp and some courage. Melissa Ludtke remembers receiving letters. They weren’t addressed to her personally, but they were about her and her court case. Many people wrote to *Sports Illustrated*

threatening to cancel their subscriptions if Time Inc. went through with the lawsuit. Some columnists wrote about her in an “extremely critical” way that questioned her morality, but their names and occasionally photos were printed above their opinions, something Ludtke thinks “tended to have a civilizing effect on what they had to say.” Now, platforms like Twitter and Reddit allow users to anonymously post heinous comments with few repercussions.

Each time Amie Just gets an “overly threatening” tweet, like a death suggestion or rape threat, she makes sure to save it. She says she doesn’t know a single woman in the industry

who has not received a hateful comment or email online about their appearance or their voice. All of us are called ugly or fat or dumb or that we need to go back into the kitchen. ... I’m the ugliest woman to walk the face of the planet and my smile is gross and my hair is gross and I’m fat and all this stuff because men don’t want women in sports unless they’re a cheerleader and they’re pretty to look at.

She chalks it up to being “the one downside” of the job (Just interview). As a public figure often writing articles on adored athletes or coaches, the backlash is swift and severe.

Sometimes the comments go behind the typical tired sexist remarks. Jori Epstein was once told to “Go back to the oven” in reference to her identity as a Jewish woman (Epstein interview). Iliana Limón Romero, sports editor of *The Orlando Sentinel*, says “the anonymity that (social media) has provided in the current climate in our country where people feel like they should not worry about having a filter and share anything that they believe” extends beyond virtual messages. “It’s not uncommon to get sexist or racist phone call messages on any given period of time,” she said, adding that emails and handwritten letters are also common (Limón Romero interview).

Most often, threatening or insulting tweets come in response to articles or tweets on controversial issues or famous figures. Female reporters will share their pieces to social media to increase engagement, and their mentions will be flooded with replies from fans of the team or the

person they have written about. Any time Julie DiCaro calls attention to male athletes who had rape or sexual assault accusations swept under the rug because of their game-day achievements, both men and women reply to her tweets to adamantly defend the athletes and viciously attack DiCaro.



Julie DiCaro  @JulieDiCaro · Mar 4, 2018

Kobe Bryant was arrested, charged with rape, and convinced the victim to drop the charges.

158 160 538

Michael w j lowing @michael_lowing

Replying to @JulieDiCaro

your wack as hell @JulieDiCaro. shame shame,. and get a REAL life in the REAL world. your simple.

3:30 AM · Mar 7, 2018 · Twitter for Android



Julie DiCaro @JulieDiCaro · Mar 4, 2018

Kobe Bryant was arrested, charged with rape, and convinced the victim to drop the charges.

158 160 538



Ayo Olayinka
@origineria

Replying to @JulieDiCaro

Your comments are disgraceful and dilutes the objectives of the real #metoo movement. Sounds like somebody wanting attention.

1:02 PM · Mar 5, 2018 from Manhattan, NY · Twitter for Android



Julie DiCaro @JulieDiCaro · Sep 14, 2017

It never ceases to amaze me that people (particularly young men) can be so awful.

8 35



Jimmy Welch
@JimmyWe099

Replying to @JulieDiCaro

It never ceases to amaze me that people (particularly lard ass ginger cunts) can be so awful. Smdh

8:56 PM · Sep 14, 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

While looking for tweets to include as examples, I found that each time a female reporter references the negative responses she gets or brings up crimes committed by men in sports, she is bombarded with insults, memes, or gifs meant to insult her or make light of the situation.

“Innocent until proven guilty” is tweeted without fail whenever a rape accusation is mentioned, and vulgar responses like the screenshot above often follow. The words and methods used to harass women in sports have drastically changed since Ludtke was called a damsel, but the desired result remains the same: keep women in their place, which should be away from sports.

Chapter 5: Protective Tactics & Support Systems

If every time we heard something we didn't love, we just shut down and left the scenario, we're not able to do our jobs right, and someone who comes after us is just going to have to deal with the same thing. — Jori Epstein, NFL reporter for *USA TODAY*

When Jourdan Rodrigue gives aspiring female sports journalists advice, she tells them to “wear what makes you comfortable. Be who you are, but understand that there are some things that you need.” She advises wearing shoes with heels but “never a pointy heel because of course you can't give an impression that you are Miss Stilettos walking through the locker room.” She makes a point of wearing chunky heels that are sturdy enough to chase after sources and tall enough to put her at eye level with the people she's interviewing, “because if there's a conversation dynamic change where someone is physically looking down on you as a person, then ... they're more inclined to speak down to you a little bit on a mental and emotional level” (Rodrigue interview).

This adherence to a strict but unwritten dress code is just one technique that female sports reporters use to minimize the effects their gender can have on their professional responsibilities. In *Best Seat in the House*, Christine Brennan recalls not only dressing conservatively when going into locker rooms, but also purposely carrying an 8.5 x 11-inch notebook, “perfectly positioned” because it was larger than the traditional reporter's notepad, and, when held at a certain angle, it covered body parts she did not want to see while interviewing male athletes in various stages of undress (122). NFL reporter Jori Epstein shuts down taunts about her gender and age from athletes with a heavy dose of sarcasm (Epstein interview), while former NHL writer Sheryl Flatow believes no reaction is the best reaction. “Don't give them the satisfaction,” she said in *Let Them Wear Towels*. “Do your job and get out of there.”

Tips and tricks like these are passed down from veterans to rookies in the industry. An unnamed panelist from the 2011 Association for Women in Sports Media (AWSM) convention is quoted in *Sportista* as urging the audience to “stay away from stereotypical woman’s behavior” (174), which is not defined by her, but by another woman who adds “Don’t bob your head up and down while people are talking! The men don’t ever do it, so you shouldn’t either” (174). The first panelist goes on to say, “You better learn to communicate with the men the way they want to be communicated with” (174), though there were no specific instructions given for how to communicate with male coworkers and bosses. At the 2019 convention, which I attended in June, women were still asking each other how they balanced assertiveness without appearing overly emotional. Meekness was frowned upon, but being too bold could get one labeled as “dramatic” or “hysterical.”

Another panel at the 2019 event was solely focused on dealing with sexual harassment. The topic was so prevalent that organizers of the event did not schedule any other panels or info sessions during that time.

During the discussion of navigating inappropriate workplace behavior, college football reporter Nicole Auerbach spoke up from the audience to offer a line she uses whenever someone (whether it be a coworker, an athlete, a coach, a general manager, or a team owner) tries to initiate romantic or sexual relations: “I trust this won’t interfere with our professional relationship.” She encouraged all the women, especially the college students, in attendance to memorize this sentence and say it with conviction.

Another panel on cyber security and online harassment followed the next day. Three writers shared their experiences of receiving comments and tweets ranging from sexist taunts to death threats, leading me to later ask Iliana Limón Romero how she shields her writers from

threats and unnecessarily negative comments. She said that she regularly checks in with reporters and monitors social media to see what is being said about her publication's articles, but "in extreme cases, we will ask them to hand over their credentials to their social media accounts, sign in for them, and essentially purge everything that is negative so they don't have to be the only ones to deal with or to see it." She liberally encourages reporters to block or mute commenters on social media and to report problematic posts. "We also take threats very, very seriously. Depending on the level, whether it's a voicemail message, a letter, an email, or Twitter or Facebook things, we ask for screenshots. We ask for the ability to take their [social media] credentials. We forward messages to our security team that is in contact with local police."

Throughout the convention, other advice offered during more casual conversations included: Don't go to bars after dark when covering NFL training camp, regular season practices, or games. It's likely that some players and members of the coaching staffs will be there, and if they see you in a more social environment, they could disregard you as a professional. Never ask for contact information in a situation that could be interpreted as anything outside of professional. Develop a thick skin because if you let every little thing get to you, you'll never get your job done. And most importantly, find a trusted editor (preferably a female) at your workplace who will back you up if you need to make accusations or file formal reports against assailants.

Connecting with allies who share these lessons and act as mentors is far easier than it used to be, due in large part to AWSM. Founded by four female sports journalists in 1987, the organization aims to promote gender equality and increase diversity in the industry through networking events and mentoring programs. Current members range from reporters who were

the first women in NFL locker rooms to college students trying to chart their own paths while following in the footsteps of those who paved the way in the 70s and 80s.

I joined AWSM as a college sophomore after seeing members tweet support for Rodrigue amid the Cam Newton situation. I hadn't been aware that there was an entire network of women who formally organized to encourage and advocate for one another, but soon after learning of the association, I applied for its scholars program. I wasn't selected on my first try, but my second attempt during junior year proved successful. I received a \$1,000 scholarship and was offered an editorial internship at *USA TODAY* for the following summer. Rodrigue and I had never spoken before I interviewed her for this piece, so she was unaware of the impact she has had on my professional path. When we were talking about the challenges she faced as a result of her exchange with Newton, she told me that she "could have never forgiven" herself if she had quit. She felt she had earned her front-row seat in the press room and refused to give it up because someone disrespected her. "I am creating that space so that another woman can sit in that seat. ... That's important to me. To take up that space on the field or in the press room or in the locker room. ... So I tell people, 'Don't quit, because it matters.'"

Jori Epstein voiced similar feelings during our interview. She felt she was "doing other women a disservice" if she didn't make people think twice about sexist comments "because if I don't tell them it's not okay, then another woman is going to have to hear it."

Because of women like Rodrigue, Epstein, and others involved with AWSM, I have an easier time asking questions at press conferences. I can talk to athletes in locker rooms with less fear that they might say something insulting or unprofessional. I have a support system that extends beyond my family, friends, classmates, and professors to include so many editors, reporters, producers, broadcasters, photographers, and hiring managers. On multiple occasions, I

have reached out to these people for feedback on my writing, networking advice, references for professional opportunities, and pep talks. When I was worried I wasn't talented enough to write for a national newspaper like *USA TODAY*, I called Christine Brennan, and she yelled "Just do it! You got this! Nobody can hold you back but you!" in a way that made me feel like I could run through a brick wall. When I wrote a baseball article that I felt was below the standard of the seasoned reporter it was initially assigned to, I called Jori, who assured me that simply writing the article by myself on such short notice was something to be proud of. And every time I filed a story for publication, patient and kind editors like Ray Cox, David Wellham, and Tom O'Toole, whom I met through opportunities AWSM opened for me, took the time to provide constructive criticism while encouraging me to keep trying new things as I developed my unique voice and writing style.

Without AWSM, I wouldn't have met co-interns like Max and Dani, who always answered my frantic texts or phone calls about headlines or deadlines, listened to me complain about having to stay late at baseball games without telling our editors, and told me where to park when I freaked out about the tiniest details on game days. Even after our internships ended and we parted ways to return to our respective colleges, they still provided suggestions when I hit writer's block and read over drafts before I hit publish.

If not for all these people, it's possible I might have quit a long time ago. I struggled with self-confidence the summer I had my first real reporting internship, and my fear of being mediocre was exacerbated every time I wrote something. I considered my stories to be bland and thought my writing style was too weak, so I called and emailed female sportswriters I admired and asked them a million questions. "When did you realize you were a good writer? That you were good at your job and that your stories weren't mediocre? How do I get from being just good

to great?” Every one of them reassured me I was on the right track and would only keep getting better. Christine told me she was so nervous on her first day at *The Miami Herald* that she almost vomited. I hung up feeling better knowing that even the icons of the industry started off on shaky legs. If they could keep writing despite fears of falling short when the whole world was watching, I could do the same.

Chapter 6: Changing Attitudes

I've often said that changing the law is a lot easier than changing attitudes. In fact, sometimes when the law is changed, people put their backs up a little bit more, and they don't want to change their attitudes. They're furious (with) what the court is making them do. — Melissa Ludtke

In “Katie Nolan joins secret society of women in sports media,” a video ESPN posted on YouTube in November 2019, Katie Nolan (the host of *Always Late with Katie Nolan*), is invited to a meeting where she joins other female sports broadcasters. A figure wearing a black hooded robe silently lets her into a house where sports broadcasters Julie Foudy, Maria Taylor, Sarah Spain, and Cari Champion welcome her into their exclusive club. Nolan asks what the first order of business is, jokingly suggesting she “sleep (her) way to the top.” The other women silently shake their heads in disapproval. She’s asked to name three of the Patriots’ defensive players, which she does easily. She’s then asked to explain an infield fly rule. She replies, “I gotta be honest. I feel like I’m at a sports bar with men” before answering. Again, the other women shake their heads. When she’s asked to name one pitcher from the 1973 World Series, she snaps and tries to leave, saying she doesn’t need to prove her sports knowledge or fandom because of her gender. The other women stop her from leaving and congratulate her for being “officially a woman in sports media.”

To swear into the society, Nolan places one hand on a copy of “Get in the Kitchen vol. 98” and pledges her allegiance to the sisterhood. Cut to a burn ceremony, where Taylor reads tweets talking about how shrill the women’s voices are and how they’re unqualified to work in sports. She tosses a copy of each into an oven and then shuts it, singeing the papers. Finally, Champion asks the members what they’re “doing this week to ruin sports for men.” When Nolan questions this — saying she had heard that’s what women in sports media do but wasn’t sure they really did it — Champion explains. “It is our only goal in life, as women in sports, to take

this thing that men have loved and destroy it piece by piece.” When Nolan asks how they do this, Champion answers simply, “In my case, I host *SportsCenter* every day.” Foudy says, “In my case, sometimes when I’m on TV, I don’t smile.” Spain adds, “I talk about football. Never even played the game.” “And I don’t cook,” Taylor chimes in. “I wore a turtleneck on TV last week,” Nolan offers after some thought. “They must’ve hated that!” Spain says. “They did!” Nolan confirms, causing the group to break into a “one of us!” chant.

While the sketch was quite cheeky in its delivery, it highlighted the sexism that female sports reporters still face on a daily basis. As Melissa Ludtke put it, the women of her era “were facing issues of changing the law, changing the rules, changing the access. . . . The mission today is very different” (Ludtke interview). In 2020, there aren’t many laws or written practices preventing women from breaking into male-dominated fields, but ideas of who should hold certain positions and who should write or talk about certain topics continue to impede women’s progress. This doesn’t exclusively apply to sports media, of course. It extends from Wall Street to Washington, D.C. to Silicon Valley and beyond. “Be in any field and be a woman who stands out, who utters an opinion, who dares to say something that may be not the shared opinion of someone else, and the sexual objection will usually come first. And then threats and the rest will come next. It’s part of our culture, it seems today,” Ludtke said. “You really have to have an elephant’s skin or a rhinoceros’s skin to be able to just push ahead and retain some kind of confidence in your work and do it well” (Ludtke interview).

Platforms like Twitter and Reddit are a big reason why thick skin is necessary, but they can also provide the opportunity to push back. ESPN broadcaster Sarah Spain often calls out sexist tweets directed at her, and many women are quick to defend their colleagues if someone is being unnecessarily attacked. Ludtke didn’t know how to respond to her critics. She wrote op-

eds occasionally but didn't feel like she had the right to reply because "there were so few of us. When there are more women in a room, more women in a job, I think it gives you a certain sense of your confidence in you being a voice among many." She feels women today dispel sexism "with humor and wit and also an assuredness of saying, 'Don't do that to me. Don't say that,'" but that doesn't come without cost. "It uses up energy that you could be using to do something else that might be a bit more productive" (Ludtke interview). Of course, the same could be said for her court case. It took time, energy, and resources that could have been allocated toward something more useful had Bowie Kuhn not needed a judge to tell him to open up the Yankees clubhouse, but it was necessary to change the law. Now, through videos, tweets, comments, and organizations, my generation is doing what is necessary to change the attitudes.

Epilogue

I initially decided to write a thesis because Professor Jon Readey told me “you’ll be able to get a job anywhere if you focus your thesis on sports media” while I was taking his sportswriting class during the spring of my freshman year. But midway through the process, I interviewed for a fellowship at *The New York Times* and was not selected. I was devastated and lost all desire to work on this project. Despite our Nonfiction Honors Advisor, Professor Catherine Imbriglio, pleading with us to write, edit, and refine over Winter Break, I did nothing. I didn’t even open the Word document. Why keep it up when I had just blown a chance at my dream job? What was the point if not to end with a big “Ta-da! I’m going to the most well-known paper in the country after I finish this!”? I continued to ignore my draft until a few weeks into the spring semester when my readers, Professor Readey and Professor Michael Stewart, said they felt the work I had left was only a fraction of what I had already done. While this lifted my spirits enough to return to the document, I didn’t feel like writing anything new. To procrastinate, I read through all my interview transcripts and re-listened to the recordings of the conversations I had with the women quoted throughout this piece. Their willingness to share their stories, to provide words of encouragement, and to applaud the progress that the industry has made while still recognizing its shortcomings finally motivated me to finish what I started back in September. (Also, you can’t interview an icon like Melissa Ludtke and then just leave the material buried on your computer.)

I honestly don’t know if this thesis will have any bearing on my employability, but I am confident that there will be more opportunities open for me than there were for all the women who came before me, and I hope the same can be said in the future by other women who follow similar paths. When I asked my interviewees if they had witnessed progress being made during

their time in the industry, all said varying degrees of yes. Jori Epstein said the biggest change she's seen over the last three years she's been in the field is that companies are proactively recruiting women. Hiring managers now reach out to her asking if she knows of any qualified women who would be good applicants for their opening, and she feels that there has been "a steady increase in the emphasis places put on diversity of their coverage, in terms of racial diversity, gender diversity." Ludtke agreed that steps forward had been taken since the days of women being relegated to the sideline, where they would get four or five minutes of airtime on a three-hour broadcast, but she emphasized that more could be done and should be done faster.

Despite the general positivity shared surrounding the increased inclusion of women, analyzing newsroom demographics data and hearing stories of workplace harassment can still be disheartening. People outside the industry frequently ask me why I want to do this, why other women keep pursuing careers in this field when it can be so unwelcoming and, at times, dangerous. Before starting this project, I had a scripted response about how I did it because it combined everything I was passionate about into something that I could actually get paid for. But when I had to take breaks from scrolling through tweets or recounting uncomfortable interactions because I felt a combination of anger, sadness, and defeat similar to my reaction following the fellowship rejection, I asked myself that question for the first time. Why do we keep going back to this when it can feel like everyone wants to keep us out? Why do we put up with death threats and vulgar insults from people who lack the nerve to put their name and face beside their statements, when we always claim our words and opinions with bylines? During our interview, Amie Just answered the question with more depth and breadth than I ever had, and her explanation reminded me why so many women, myself included, choose to keep at it.

I do not have to sit at a desk 8-5 and do something that I find meaningless. I get to do something fun every day, and it's awesome! I get to meet people with amazing

stories, and I get to talk to their families. I get to do journalism that people enjoy because it's about sports ... I get to travel all the time for work and eat at really cool restaurants and have really awesome experiences. I get to meet so many amazing people, whether that's journalists in the industry or athletes or other random people that like sports. There's a reason why people go into this job. It's fun!

She acknowledged that some days suck, but they still beat a better day in any other job. She encouraged me to focus on the positives because "it's really easy to get caught up in all the scary things about this industry, but there are scary things about every single industry. ... If that's what's deterring you from this, my rebuttal is: What job are you safe in? The answer is none. ... If shitty things are going to happen to you, you might as well do something fun."

I finish this thesis feeling grateful that so much heavy lifting and trailblazing has already been done by women who came before me. I have a clearer path to professionally do something I love because of them, and I feel the only way to demonstrate my gratitude is to push for larger steps toward gender equality. I intend to keep having fun. I intend to continue working in this industry because I enjoy it more than anything else, and I would be doing a disservice to myself and my predecessors if I quit because someone made me feel like I didn't belong either through their words or their actions. Melissa, Iliana, Jori, Jourdan, Amie, and so many others made space so that I could have a seat at the press conference, and I intend to take it.

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