

The Women's Sports Foundation Report Brief: Her Life Depends On It III & Women, Sport, and Executive Leadership

In 2013, Ernst & Young published results from a survey of business leaders from around the world who were asked to offer their views on the value of sport participation for women and working in high-performing teams (n = 328 female, 493 male).¹ Women holding positions at the executive level were found to have participated in university sport more frequently than women who were in manager positions (55% to 39%, respectively). Women executives participating in the survey believed that a background in sport was helpful to career advancement because sport participation prepares people to work better in teams (just under 70%) and behaviors and techniques from sport (a high-performance environment) can be applied to the corporate setting (76%) (Ernst & Young, 2013).

A year later, in a follow-up study of 400 women executives from around the world (Brazil, Canada, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States), sport participation was identified as something that employers looked for in successful candidates for hiring and promotion (Ernst & Young, 2014). Nearly a quarter of the women executives responding to the survey (74%) held the perspective that sport participation has the potential to help move a woman along faster in her career. Reflecting on their own careers, 61% of the women executives held a belief that their personal involvement in sport contributed positively to their career success and advancement (Ernst & Young, 2014).

While women's success in business cannot be attributed to any one factor, the competitive culture of sport that places a high value on performance, performance under pressure, and teamwork may foster qualities, like resilience and strong work ethic, which translate well in corporate settings. The findings reported in the Ernst & Young reports (2013; 2014) are consistent with some other early studies looking at the success of women in business. A study of women executives undertaken by research firm Catalyst (Tahmincioglu, 2012) revealed an overwhelming majority of women executives (82%) had participated in sport at one time in their lives beyond the elementary school level. Sixty percent of women executives credited sport participation with helping them cultivate an understanding of what it took to compete; in effect they developed "a competitive edge" that enabled them to work with others in the business world. Similarly, of the more than 400 senior women business executives who reported earning



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\$75,000 or more in annual income, 81% were physically active and had been involved in organized team sports when they were growing up. They associated their sport involvement with developing several attributes that they drew upon in their work, including being more disciplined than others (86%); having leadership skills (69%); having the ability to deal with failure (69%); and having a competitive edge (59%) (Di Giorgio, 2013).

While most of the studies on women executives and their attitudes about sport have come from the corporate sector, Wentworth (2009) interviewed nine women executives who worked in higher education, the corporate sector, and the military. As was the case with the women in the Ernst & Young and Catalyst studies, these women identified several aspects of their sport experience as relevant to their work as executives, including exposure to competition, working productively in team settings, and having opportunities to lead. Among the benefits of sport participation, these women executives spoke about the confidence that comes from being tested in competitive situations, the necessity to develop resilience during tough times, and appreciation for being in the game, in effect, meaning that challenges could be viewed as opportunities to be dealt with and handled.

Despite assertions made by those inside and outside of sport that involvement in sport can help to train leaders, the sport business sector itself has been slow to recognize women as leaders even though more and more women are passing through the sport system in the United States. Women continue to maintain a tenuous hold over their positions within major sport leagues in the United States.

Representation of Women Leaders within U.S. Professional Sport

Some of the most influential and important leaders within U.S. professional sport are women. Across the major sports and entertainment landscape, women hold positions of power and authority. Among the women featured by *Street & Smith's Sports Business Journal* as Game Changers in 2015 were:

- Susan Cohig, Senior Vice President, Business Affairs & Integrated Marketing, National Hockey League
- Pam El, Executive Vice President & Chief Marketing Officer, National Basketball Association
- Katrina Adams, Chairman, CEO, and President, United States Tennis Association
- Dawn Hudson, Executive Vice President & Chief Marketing Officer, National Football League
- Ilana Kloss, CEO & Commissioner, Mylan World TeamTennis
- Michelle Roberts, Executive Director of the National Basketball Players Association;
- Michelle Wilson, Chief Revenue and Marketing Officer, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) (Game Changers Conference, 2015).

Some insight into the magnitude of the enterprises women sport executives run can be found in a March 2013 report by *Sports Illustrated* highlighting 10 of the most influential women in sport (Newman, 2013). They included:

- Sharon Byers, Group Vice President, and Alison Lewis, Senior Vice President for North America Marketing, Coca Cola North American (annual sports revenue — \$260M).
- Cindy Davis, Vice President, Nike Inc., and Vice President, Nike Golf (annual sports revenue — \$623M)
- Christine Driessen, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer, ESPN (annual sports revenue — \$8.2B)
- Lisa France Kennedy, CEO, International Speedway (annual sports revenue — \$750M)
- Heidi Ueberroth, President of International Business Operations, NBA (annual sports revenue — \$300M)
- Michelle Wilson, Chief Marketing Officer, WWE (annual sports revenue — \$525M)
- Denise DeBartolo York, Former Owner and Current Co-Chair, San Francisco 49ers (annual sports revenue — \$214M)
- Rita Benson LeBlanc, Part Owner and Vice-Chair of the Board, New Orleans Saints (annual sports revenue — \$232M)

While women are slowly moving into roles at the highest level of professional sport, the industry has been slow to hire women and to retain them. According to a 2011 Turnkey Sports Poll, which included 1,100 senior-level sports executives, 49% indicated that they had, at some point during their professional careers, reported to a female



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supervisor (Staff, 2011). Even though more than half indicated that they had never reported to a woman in their careers, a troubling sign of the degree to which the sport industry remains closed to women, it does signal a shift from a time when the reporting pipeline would have been exclusively male. Still, well over half of both female and male senior-level sport executives were in agreement that women faced more challenges achieving success in the business of sports (Staff, 2011).

Hiring Trends in U.S. Professional Sport

Based on the longitudinal studies conducted by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida, which has issued race and gender report cards on select U.S. professional sport leagues, progress for women in the professional sport workplace has been slow. Since the 1980s, the Report Card has graded Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and the National Football League (NFL) on their demonstrated record of hiring women and minorities in leadership positions. The Report Card later expanded its scope to include Major League Soccer (MLS), the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA).

The shining star for women in the professional leagues is the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). From its earliest beginnings, the league had a sensibility about hiring women and has been a league for women run with significant majorities of women in key roles. Even here, however, women have actually lost ground in recent years. Over time, the significant roles of head coach, general manager, and athletic training have all had declines in women's representation of

nearly 40% or more. From the time of the WNBA's founding in 1998 to 2014, the percentage of women head coaches fell from 70% to 50%; women general managers from 77% to 40%; and women athletic trainers from 100% to 54% (Lapchick, Johnson, & Yacaman, 2014).

These percentages need to be understood in context given the relatively small number of teams that comprise the WNBA (12). When changes occur within such a small pool, the percentage change can be overinflated. That said, since there are only 12 teams in the WNBA, that kind of instability raises questions.

Whereas the majority of WNBA employees throughout the league are women, this situation is a clear anomaly when compared to the industry overall. The WNBA's brother league, the NBA, has a record of hiring women that has historically placed it well ahead of other professional leagues. Below are summaries of women's representation within the NBA, MLB, NFL, and MLS.

- During the 2013-14 season, just under 25% of National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise owners were women, while women comprised less than eight percent of chief executive officers, 16.6% of team vice presidents, 21.4% of senior level administrators, and 35% of professional administration (e.g., managers, supervisors, or coordinators in areas such as marketing, promotions, and publications) (Lapchick, Donovan, Loomer, & Martinez, 2014). The representation of women minority owners declined from 12.7% in 2011-2012 to 5.6 percent.
- Professional baseball has been slow to hire women, and the industry has recorded slight declines in hiring women over the past four years. For the 2014 season women made up approximately 30% of the total workforce in Major League Baseball. Women held 22.6% of positions at the senior executive level and 26.8% of director and managerial positions. Just over 16% of majority owners in MLB were women. Within positions of power and authority, women made up 17.3% of team vice presidents and 27.2% senior team administrators (i.e., senior advisors, assistant general managers, legal counsels). Women also held 28% of the professional administration positions as managers, supervisors, or coordinators in MLB (Lapchick & Salas, 2015).
- Relying on data from the 2012 season, Lapchick, Donovan, Rogers, & Johnson (2014) determined that 9% of NFL majority owners serving at the chief executive officer/president level were women and 15% at the vice president level were women. Women comprised 20% and 34% of senior and professional team administrators, while 1% of those announcing NFL games were women.



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- Major League Soccer (MLS) has presented a mixed profile in terms of their hiring of women, being more likely to hire in the league office but less likely at the professional team level. In 2014, MLS rebounded from a failing grade to a grade of C+ after hiring more women in league office position. However, similar to previous years, there were still no women in positions of ownership or at the general manager level. Fewer than 15% of team presidents were women, and 19.5% of senior administration was comprised of women. Where women were most represented within MLS was in the league office among professional employees (Lapchick, Dominigues, Haldane, Loomer, & Pelts, 2014).

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The full report can be accessed online at:
www.WomensSportsFoundation.org/HerLifeDependsOnIt3

Endnotes

¹ Executives and managers participating in the study represented companies from a wide range of sectors. Those who participated in the survey had annual revenues in excess of US\$250 million.

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