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# The Games Behind the Scenes: Newspaper Framing of Female African American Olympic Athletes

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The Games Behind the Scenes: Newspaper Framing of Female African American  
Olympic Athletes

by

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## ABSTRACT

Competing in and representing their country in the Olympic games is considered one of the greatest achievements for an athlete. From heroes such as Michael Jordan and the “Dream Team,” to Michael Phelps setting world record after record in the pool, Olympians are remembered as legends to those watching at home. How their amazing achievements at these Olympic games have been framed by the media though is another story. Newspapers have facilitated a platform for a qualitative content analysis on the framing of three female African American Olympic gold medalists that showed statistical significance in terms of the amount of “Superhuman” athleticism attributes used as well as not used by four large well-known and respected newspapers.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The modern Olympic Games are a sporting event unlike any other. While they share similarities with other sporting events, no other competition can say it has run quite as long and is the birth of sport. Many heroes, regardless of nation, have been discovered through the Olympic Games and recorded in history as the greatest athletes ever. Among U. S. athletes, the list goes back to at least track star Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics and includes contemporary world record holders such as sprinter Carl Lewis, swimmer Michael Phelps, gymnast Gabrielle Douglas, and snowboarder Shaun White. The Olympics are generally considered to be the highest pinnacle and absolute best athletes can reach. The Olympics are generally considered to be the pinnacle which only the absolute best athletes can reach. Moreover, the games carry cultural and political significance as athletes are seen as representing their country's strength, values and ideals. Most people experience Olympics through mass media, which meant newspapers until television came along in the mid-20th century. How these media report on the athletes and their competition conveys messages not only about the athletes but the society in which they live. Previous literature raises concerns about media portrayal of African American athletes, suggesting those portrayals largely support stereotypical notions about African Americans. This study examines portrayals of selected African American female Olympians.



It is important to analyze media coverage of sport because, among other things, media play a role in creating boundaries that people use to understand their own culture and helping them know what to think about a topic (Hall, 1984). The media being involved in sports helps shape consumers and culture through the portrayal of athletes and creates “resources for understanding who “we” are and who “they” are” (Bruce, 2012). This split of “we” and “they” leads to making athletes significant parts of people’s lives by influencing culture and making ordinary people want to be “them.” So, from both an economic and societal position, “communication and sport matter because they work together to form an influential and pervasive relationship throughout societies and economies. Simply stated, sport cannot exist without communication” (Pederson, 2012 p. 57).

This study will address this relationship of sport and communication by analyzing the mass media covering African American female Olympians. Particularly, this study address newspaper framing of significant history-making African American women by looking at whether their performance or personality is highlighted in coverage of them before and after their competition by analyzing the frames used by reporters from *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. The female African American Olympians that will be analyzed in this study are Debi Thomas in the 1988 Winter games, Florence Griffith Joyner in the 1988 Summer Games, and Simone Biles in the 2016 Summer Games.

Debra “Debi” Thomas became the first black athlete to ever win a medal in the Winter Olympics when she won a bronze medal in the figure skating competition in the

1988 Winter Games in Calgary, Canada (Kinnear, 2018). Going into the 1988 games, Thomas was considered a lock for the gold medal, having a World Championship medal and United States Championships in figure skating despite studying engineering at Stanford University (Capretto, 2015). In what became known as the “Battle of the Carmen’s,” Thomas performed to the same song, “Carmen,” against East Germany’s Katarina Witt who ended up winning the gold medal (Webley, 2010).

Florence “Flo-Jo” Griffith Joyner won three multiple gold medals in track and field athlete who is medaled gold medals in track in the 1988 Summer games in Seoul, South Korea. and She is known as the “fastest woman ever” due to her still standing world records in the Olympic 100 and 200 meters (Moore, 1989). Griffith Joyner became a celebrity through her style, personality, and endorsement deals and changed the idea of what female athletes were expected to look like and what they were expected to wear in order to be athletic (Moore, 1989). Described as “Dressing like Madonna” and “Running as fast as O. J. Simpson” by Sports Illustrated, Griffith Joyner stunned Olympic viewers by breaking her own records over and over, often wearing self-designed stylish outfits and sporting 6-inch fingernails.

Simone Biles won four gold medals in gymnastics in the 2016 Summer games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and is known as the “most decorated” American gymnast in Olympic history (Correa, 2018). Overall, she has won xx Olympic medals. Adopted by her grandparents out of foster care with her sister (Longman, 2016), Biles became a celebrity sensation in the 2016 games. Her achievements were seen and pointed out by stars such as Zac Efron and Kim Kardashian on social media and she led the United

States team, known as the “Final Five,” winning a medal in every event, individual and team (Maine, 2017).

This study will examine newspaper framing of the three athletes throughout multiple regions of the country by looking at feature and news articles that cover the athletes leading up to the Olympics and their performances in the Olympics competitions. This study is important in aiding current journalists who that cover sport to see what kind of job they have done in this culturally sensitive area of sport and race, an area many use to help develop their perceptions of African Americans as a whole. The study is also important because it helps to fill the gap in sport and media literature addressing the portrayals of African American female athletes.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE AND THEORY

#### **Olympic Background**

Dating back to 776 B. C., the first “game” to take place was a 600 feet foot race (Kotynski, 2006). This “race,” won by Polites, spawned competition throughout Greece to race him. These races slowly grew the games in ancient Greece by adding multiple competitions and growing in size of competitors in Olympia, Greece, for more than a millennium (Young, 2008). The games stopped sometime around 400 A. D. due to barbarians invading Greece and Olympia slowly being damaged (Young, 2008). Eventually, the games were brought back to Greece on April 6, 1896, for what is now recognized as the start of the “modern” games under the International Olympic Committee (Guttmann, 2002). This was due to the work of William Penny Brookes, Pierre de Coubertin, and Evangelos Zappas (Young, 1996).

Brookes, an Englishman, worked to revive the idea of international competition and the idea of amateurism. A physician, Brookes believed the best course to combat sickness was through physical exercise. He was inspired to pursue an international Olympics by the work of Evangelos Zappas (Gerlach, 2004), a Greek businessman who had revived the Olympics in his home country of Greece. The businessman financed what is now known as the Zappas Olympics in 1859, 1870, and 1875, which featured only

athletes of Greek ethnicity (Matthews, 2005). Zappas lived to see only one of those three games but left behind a large fortune to help finance the last two.

Brookes, who helped pay winners of the Zappas games, was a fan of Zappas' ideas and philosophies and inspired him to get physical education accepted in school curriculums in England (Beale, 2011). Brookes had already started his own form of the Olympian games in England in 1850 called the "Olympian Class," a smaller city-wide event which featured sports such as soccer and cricket (Beale, 2011). Meanwhile in France, Pierre de Coubertin, a French academic who also worked to teach Physical Education, was invited by Brookes to attend his "Olympian games" in 1889 and inspired Coubertin to pursue an international meeting of athletes to revive the Olympic games (Guttmann, 2002). Coubertin proposed to a congress of 13 nations including, the United States, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Greece, Spain, Italy, and Russia that amateurism in sport for just the working class was currently missing and the group voted unanimously to restart the games in Athens, Greece (Hill, 1996). The first modern games featured 214 male athletes from 14 different nations to compete in 10 sports. Newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Herald*, *The Boston Post*, and the *Vermont Phoenix* sent reporters to cover what was expected to be a spectacular event. (Poynter, 2015).

Today, there are two Olympic games based on the season. The first is the "Summer Games" and the second is the "Winter Games." The first Olympics to feature winter sports was the 1920 games in Antwerp, Belgium, which showcased figure skating and ice hockey (Lu & Clark, 2014). Following the success of those games, the International Olympic Committee created the first Winter games in 1924 and hosted them the same year as the Summer games; they have been held every four years since then

except in the 1940 and 1944 when the games were canceled due to World War II (Grys, 1996). The first Olympic winter games to be held in a separate year from the Summer games was the 1994 games in Lillehammer, Norway (Miller, 2008).

### **Olympic Media Coverage**

The first televised Olympic games were broadcast in 1936 in Berlin. Instant replay, which is now a staple in televised sports, is considered to have gotten its birth in the 1960 Winter games on CBS after referees asked the broadcast company to view footage to see if a male skier had missed a gate (International Olympic Committee, 2018). Famous moments in sports and even politics have been made through the games with moments like the “Miracle on Ice,” where the United States famously pulled off arguably the largest upset ever in any sport by defeating the Soviet Union in hockey in the semifinals of the 1980 Olympic games in Lake Placid, New York (Abelson, 2010). The upset has been called the greatest sports moment of the 20th century by *Sports Illustrated* (Domin, 2016). Another famous moment was when sportscaster Jim McKay, after broadcasting for fourteen tense hours straight with no break, sadly uttered “They’re all gone,” referring to the murder of 11 Israeli team members at the Munich games in 1972 (Hiestand, 2008).

Newspapers, magazines, and other forms of print media also tend to provide extensive coverage of the Olympic games. The *Los Angeles Times*, one of the papers featured in the present study, sent over 13 staffers to the London Olympics in 2012, despite print media and newspapers starting to cut back travel funding (Sherman, 2012). “I didn’t have to do a sales job (to upper management),” said *Los Angeles Times*’ sports

editor Mike James. “They recognize the Olympics are an important thing we do during two-plus weeks. It’s a chance for us to broaden our readership. You get a lot of interest from people who don’t normally read our section during the Olympics” (Sherman, 2012, pg. 1). *USA Today* devoted 84 total staffers to the London games. Dave Morgan, editor in chief for the Sport Department, explained, “We see the newspaper as the sizzle reel for all the work appearing across our digital platforms. We will be creating much more content on a daily basis than we can hope to publish in print, and of course we don’t print every day, so the newspaper can’t be our only focus. But it is still our flagship product that best differentiates our content for the audience” (Sherman, 2012, pg.1)

The Olympics still draw some of the largest audiences for television, with the 2018 PyeongChang winter games drawing an average of 19.8 million viewers a night (Otterson, 2018). The audience and consumers that do not travel to these games, which is most people, learn about the Olympics every four years from the media. NBC has reportedly paid \$7.7 billion to control the television rights to the Olympics until 2032 (Garcia, 2018). The network, along with print media, will be able to act as a gatekeeper and frame how the athletes are seen by millions in the United States.

NBC’s dominate hold on the rights for the Olympics has seen backlash on the fact that the Olympics are only presented through NBC’s decision making (Alexander, 2016), creating a new area of research identifying the media frames NBC has used on their broadcasts, specifically their Olympic broadcasts. Much of that research has generally been dedicated to framing of male athletes, black and white, American and otherwise (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002, 2003). The present study expands this focus to black female Olympic athletes.

## **Historic Blacks in the Olympics**

Since Jesse Owens won a gold medal in track in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, there has been no shortage of Black athletes who have become superstars in the world of sports. There are many Black Olympians that have gone down in history for not only their athletic success but the cultural and political significance of their success off the field. This section provides background on the falling of racial barriers in the Olympics.

Blacks first officially competed in the Olympics in 1900, not at the start of the original modern games in 1896 however this was not due to the Olympic rules. Europe in the 18th century was allowed to selectively choose which of the amateur athletes they wanted to represent their teams and thus limiting black participation (Berlin, 2016). This is also true for the history of the United States in the Olympics, with around the first 60 years of the team being majority White except for rare college athletes, however opposite of the U. S., the Olympic sports were desegregated always (Berlin, 2016).

The first Black athlete to compete was Haitian-born French rugby player Constantin Henriquez, who won a Gold medal with the French rugby team in the Paris, France games in 1900 (Wiggins, 2015). The first Black athlete to win an individual medal was African American George Poage, who won two bronze medals as a hurdler in the 1904 games in St. Louis, Missouri (Bloom, 2013). Poage's decision to compete in those games was controversial at the time due to a protest from African American athletes who had chosen not to compete due to racially segregated spectator seats and facilities because of Jim Crow laws (University of Wisconsin, 2012). Poage, a history graduate



from the University of Wisconsin who was able to speak and read five different languages, chose to compete in four events. He won a medal in two (Bloom, 2013).

The first African American to win a gold medal would come shortly after, in 1908 with track athlete John Baxter Taylor. Taylor won a gold medal in a men's relay in the 1908 games in London, United Kingdom (Berlin, 2016). DeHart Hubbard would win the first individual gold medal as an African American in 1924, in the long jump in the Paris games (Rowland, 2018). As for the winter games, Debi Thomas, who is a feature of this study, is the first Black athlete to medal in the winter Olympics, doing so with a bronze medal in the 1988 games in Calgary, Canada (Licea, 2018). Shani Davis has since gone on to become the first Black athlete to win an individual Gold medal, finishing first in Speed Skating in the 2006 games in Turin, Italy (Isaacson, 2010).

Along with the historic firsts, there have been several historic moments involving African Americans. Jesse Owens' achievements of winning four gold medals in Berlin, Germany at the 1936 Olympics have gone down in history as a triumph over Adolf Hitler and his Aryan master race idea of white superiority (Schwartz, 2007). The raised fist protesting racial discrimination in the United States by medal winners John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 games in Mexico City, Mexico is forever known for the Human-Rights movement (Bass, 2002). The pair was suspended forever from Olympic competition for the protest, but their actions inspired others, including sprinters Vincent Matthews and Wayne Collett who conducted their own protests in the 1972 games. Carlos and Smith have since gone on to win the "Arthur Ashe Courage Award," an award given by ESPN in honor of African American tennis player Arthur Ashe. (Amdur, 1972,

ESPN, 2008). The award is given to those who demonstrate courage to fight for their beliefs.

### **Race and Females in Sport**

Previous research suggests Black athletes have historically been marginalized in the sports media. “Sports Illustrated” is considered one of, if not the most widely read, sports magazines and serves as a fair gauge of what is considered the “status and popularity of American sport.” However, a study of feature articles in the magazine found that coverage of Black athletes was not equal to coverage of Whites, nor was the coverage a fair representation of Blacks’ participation in the sporting world. An examination of 3,723 feature articles over a 34-year period showed black athletes accounted for only 21% of the athletes featured in “Sports Illustrated” although their percentage in sports was much higher. Also, feature articles on Black athletes were substantially shorter in length than those on White athletes (Lumpkin and Williams, 1991).

This is not just limited to male athletes. Corbett (1988) identified limited coverage of African American women athletes in 14 different magazines, which suggests that African American women athletes tend to be marginalized. Williams (1994) found only five African American women appeared on the cover of “Sports Illustrated” during a span of 1,835 issues up to the early 1990s. A more recent content analysis study on “*ESPN the Magazine*” and “*Sports Illustrated*,” which examined 245 covers between both magazines during the time span of 2012-2016, found that despite the increased

participation of women in sport thanks to Title IX advancements, women only appeared on 10% of covers (Frisby, 2017).

Furthermore, most studies done in context to race and sport analyze Black athletes to be generally associated with the following attributes or stereotypes: superior physical ability, lacking knowledge or character skills (Raney & Bryant, 2009). Also, Raney and Bryant argue that these studies of race and sport investigate personality stereotypes of: framing of selfishness, lacking discipline needed to perform at a higher level and arrogance or egotistical. (Raney & Bryant, 2009). There has been little coverage on African-American athletes who differ from stereotypical norms of Black culture (Smith, 1995) however despite this, sport is one outlet that Blacks, and minorities have been accepted more easily (Harrison, 2001).

Stereotypes as a way of characterizing Black athletes also feeds into the media portrayal of the Black female athlete and how she is generally framed. Previous studies show Black women have been framed in print media racially and sexually different than White women (Cahn, 1994; Hall, 2001; Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Walsdorf, 2004; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). Sport participation for females has been studied by scholars on how often women conform in sport to traditional images associated with female behavior (Kane, 1988; Koivula, 1995).

Due to different sports participated in, such as swimming that requires a different body shape than a sport like track and field that features more Black presence, Black female body types have since become “defeminized” (Hall, 1996; Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Walsdorf, 2004; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). This difference in body image has been argued for example in swimming. Competitive swimming has been argued to be

more associated with swimsuit contests and beauty pageants which leads to socially making it more female appropriate (Entine, 2000). This sport has seen a larger presence by white female athletes instead and opened larger opportunities for black females in track in field leading to terms such as “man-ladies” (Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Walsdorf, 2004; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998)

Women in sports programs are often used portrayed as sex symbols of femininity, cheering on men and serving as props at games (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). Female athletes’ bodies are now shown in magazines and articles emphasizing their looks rather than their athletics, with examples such as top female athletes participating in swimsuit magazines for Sports Illustrated (Eastman & Billings, 2000). Stevenson (2002) argues that to attract media attention, women’s sports have embraced this sex appeal attribute in terms of outfits used to compete in. Tennis and golf players have adopted smaller skirts, female American football leagues exist that involve the women wearing just lingerie, shoulder pads, and helmets.

A significant body of previous research shows gender stereotyping and racial discrimination is in sport. (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Billings & Eastman, 2003). African-Americans in sports have been researched extensively and Harry Edwards has been in the forefront of that research. Edwards has helped create an identity of the Black athlete in African-American sports scholarship. Wiggins (1986) argues the black athlete is vital to shaping sport. Edwards (1969) has addressed this as well by citing historic examples like the raised black fist protest by John Carlos and Tommie Smith as key moments in shaping not only black athlete history but the history of sport. Smith and Carlos are two track athletes who won gold and bronze,

respectively, in the 1968 games in Mexico City, then protested during the medal award ceremony by each raising a black gloved fist while on the podium during the United States national anthem (Brown, 2017). Due to the importance of the Tommie Smith's and John Carlos' Black Power fist and glove protest, it is considered the start of recognition for the Black athlete and is one of the most memorable moments in race and sport coverage (Hartmann, 2003).

Edwards (1982) has also argued that while sport has been used as political propaganda to advertise for patriotic race relations and goodwill acceptance, sport has been the exact opposite in real life. There is a misconception that because Blacks have been able to break through in the world of sport, they have been able to do so outside of sports, Edwards says. This breakthrough of acceptance has led to a “treadmill of oblivion” in terms of future fortune and jobs, according to Edwards. “There is disturbingly consistent evidence that the Black athlete who blindly sets out to fill the shoes of Dr. J., Reggie J., Magic J., Kareem Abdul-J., or O.J., is destined to end up with no J-no job whatsoever that he is qualified to do in our modern, technologically sophisticated society,” he said, using references are to popular Black athletes at the time (Edwards, 1982, p. 19). His concern is that portraying Blacks as gifted athletically sends a message to Black youth that their future is in athletics, not the many other more numerous career options.

The racial stereotype of blacks as implies that athletes who are White are “disadvantaged relative to black athletes, who are seen as having superior physiology” (Davis & Harris, 1998, p. 158). Andrews (1996a, 1996b), Davis (1990), and Sailes (1993), argue that televised male sport is key in framing what Andrews describes as

“stereotypical and divisive, yet common-sense, embodied articulations of race and racial difference” (Andrews, 1996b, p. 132).

Like Edwards, Amy Bass in her book, “Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete,” argues that the Black athlete is made up of more than just performance in sports. The Black athlete is also media portrayals and racial understanding that is made up of “events that included the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., uprisings in American cities, student protests around the world, the rise of the Black Power movement, and decolonization and apartheid in Africa and much more (Bass, 2002).

The role of race plays a significant role in sports media despite those who hope to just play the game as athletes or just enjoy the game as spectators. Media coverage of sports now tends to feature editorial stances and opinion-based writing by some of the most popular television sports analysts in the industry. Popular shows on ESPN such as “First Take” or “The Herd” on Fox Sports feature celebrity sports analysts such as Stephan A. Smith, Skip Bayless, or Colin Cowherd giving their opinions on the most widely discussed sports issues, including racial portrayals. Opinions are also popular in newspapers, particularly in columns from popular writers such as Jason Whitlock who has been a face in racial commentary in his Kansas City Star sports columns and later for ESPN and Fox Sports 1 (Plambeck, 2010). Whitlock was a key figure in helping ESPN set up the popular website “The Undeclared,” which calls itself the “premier platform for exploring the intersections of race, sports and culture” (Undeclared, 2016).

Seate, Hardwood and Blecha (2010) suggest there is growing awareness of racial stereotyping in media coverage of Blacks in sports, stereotyping that might be made

worse by the prevalence of opinion-based writing. Kathleen McElroy notes that race played a part in the framing of NBA player Jeremy Lin during his rise to fandom from the phenomena of “Linsanity” in 2011. Lin, arose to stardom within the course of a week by coming off the bench for one of the most well-known National Basketball Association teams, the New York Knicks, and guiding the team to wins while breaking scoring records during his first few games in the league (Maese, 2012). Lin’s success was unprecedented at the time, as he was nearly waived from the team before his debut and was living on the couch of a teammate (Zennie, 2012). Part of the framing that went into newspapers crafting “Linsanity” around the world came from his race and him being an oddity to the NBA with a majority of its athletes being Black (McElroy, 2014).

### **Media and Sport**

This section shows how significant sport is in society, and the important role played in it by the media. Additionally, it addresses where the media are lacking. The traditional sense of sport is organized athletic competition that requires physical skills to compete against others (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). While primitive sport was simply athletic competitions, sports have grown with the times and modern sport is now defined as competitions with winners and losers in an organized setting with motivations (Guttman, 2004). We are in a new era where sports take a variety of shapes and venues, even competitions electronically on video game consoles. These video game players are also called athletes (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010).

Regardless of the changes, sport and media have continuously grown in a symbiotic relationship. Current scholarship looking into the relationship of race and

sports media is necessary communication research (Butterworth, 2007). In the 1880's sports took up only about .04% of newspapers, often written by unnamed writers, that number would grow to about 20% by 1920 (Moritz, 2014). This would lead to the "Golden Era" of Sports Journalism from the 1920s to the 1950s where stars such as Grantland Rice would craft stories through the original process of taking notes during a game and interviewing players and managers afterwards. Even today, though, while the practices are still the same, sports remain a large interest for audiences. ESPN has multiple 24-hour long channels dedicated to sport news that draw large audiences and a new subscription service that hit 1million paid subscribers in record numbers (Low, 2018).

With sports constantly growing, having an expected market of \$73.5 billion in 2019 (Heitner, 2016), media have an increasing relatively inexpensive pool of programming material. At the same time, the growth of sports is partially due to coverage given by the media. Sport broadcasts rights are projected to rise from \$14.6 billion in 2014 to \$20.5 billion by the end of 2019 (Heitner, 2016). Part of this growth stems from new technological advancements, allowing consumers to get constant access to sports coverage through means such as social media. Articles are now published every minute, with updates coming daily for free. Sport journalists used to be the only way for athletes to brand themselves to the public, further highlighting a symbiotic relationship between the media and sport. Pundits argue that athletes no longer need the media to spread their messages to the audience and fans thanks to social media (Brown, 2013). However, news outlets still provide tons of coverage and are working to include athletes more often into their content (McCollough, 2018).



According to some scholars, sport reflects society as sport plays a significant cultural role in society (Eitzen, 2001; Koski, 2012; Maguire, 2001). Thus, to report on sport is to report on society, the good and the bad. For example, Eitzen notes that corruption in the sports industry as well as drug use among athletes reflects these ills in general society. Likewise, factors such as racism and substance abuse in the sporting world reflect the same issues seen in the world today (Aaseng, 1993). This further highlights the importance of the sport and media relationship, as media identify issues and help raise awareness and possibly solutions. Koski points out that “broader societal changes are clearly paralleled by changes in sports clubs, such as ageing, social differentiation, urbanization, higher levels of education and other cultural changes” (2012, p. 2).

The history of sport has always been associated with masculinity and images of man (Cahn, 1994; Mangan, 1992;). Previous research shows the media help sustain this gender order of masculinity in sport (Daddario, 1997; Duncan & Messner, 2000; Eastman & Billings, 2000, 2001). For example, broadcast teams that cover and provide play by play game announcing and analysis for sports competitions show a difference in their language for male athletes versus female athletes (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002). Toohey and Veal (2000) believe differences in language stem from scientifically based assumptions that “women are physically inferior to men and that it is unbecoming for them to indulge in certain activities, many Olympic sports being included on the list of inappropriate pastimes” (p.179).

Women’s coverage in sport can also be reflected in their societal view. Women fought for rights including the right to vote which was finally protected in the 19th

Amendment as well as equal sport opportunities which are guaranteed in Title IX. Women still fight today for equal coverage from the media in sport. From 1995 to 2002, even with the WNBA starting in 1997, coverage devoted to women's sports on ESPN's flagship show, Sportscenter, decreased (Adams & Tuggle, 2004). In 2014, only 2% of Sportscenter and only 2.5% of all ESPN coverage was devoted to women's sports (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015). Likewise, newspapers and magazines both showed no interest in equalizing coverage (Kian, Vincent, & Modello 2008; Lumpkin, 2009). Interestingly, this comes also at a time when women's professional sport options are at their peak, with options such as the Women's National Basketball Association, National Women's Soccer League, and National Women's Hockey League.

With no outlet from the media for large amounts of women's sports coverage, social media has become an avenue for possible success. Through blogs and social media, women now have access to a platform that can reach anyone who shows a desire for women's sports (Hardin, 2009). This idea should be strengthened by the idea that newscasts and newspapers have limited time and space while the internet does not; however, early results say otherwise. A study from 2016 shows that "Even with the opportunity to use Twitter as a tool to deliver the women's sports stories and scores that are seemingly ignored on the evening broadcast, the local sports broadcasters chose to focus on men's sports" (Hull, 2017 p. 483).

### **Framing Theory**

By examining media content, it is possible to get a view into the consciousness from the media transferred over to the reader (Entman, 1993). Media framing theory is based on

the idea that issues of public interest shown by media sources influence how audiences think about the issues (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). There also is evidence that the way topic on the agenda is framed can have measurable behavioral consequences. The attributes of an issue emphasized in the news coverage can, for example, directly influence the direction of public opinion. Framing theory maintains that frames shown to audiences and consumers serve to suggest to viewers how to interpret events and issues (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Gitlin (1980) says "frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters (p. 6)." Furthermore frames "enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely: to recognize it as information, to assign it cognitive categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences, (p. 7)"

Media frames can serve four key functions for their readers; those functions are defining problems, making moral judgments, diagnosing causes, and suggesting remedies for those problems (Entman, 1993). Defining problems is simply that the media identify what problems the public should know about as well as identify the causes for these problems.

Frames exist in the news media through a variety of ways. In news, frames are how journalists describe events to those not there to experience events firsthand. From the way the journalist presents the topic, whether it be from crafting the story or packing the story with headlines and the pictures, or both, the media creates frames they think best tell the story from their understanding. The adjectives and other descriptors used to describe actions serve as attributes to the frames. Attribute-framing can be seen on

something such as a label, pointing out “90% Fat-Free” and research shows that this labeling makes a heavy influence (Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998).

Not only is attribute-framing shown in marketing by businesses, it is a well-known practice with politicians and politics as well in how policies are described and disseminated to the public (Hardisty, Johnson, & Weber, 2010). However, this present study will examine attribute-framing in terms of communication. Spence and Pidgeon (2010) define attribute-framing as “the process of highlighting some particular aspect, or attribute, of the target object or issue” (pg. 657). Hallahan (1999) suggests that the media can be effective in not only raising awareness on particular topics or traits but also can create specific awareness of attributes related to people such as gender or racial stereotyping.

Examining framing in newspapers in historical research shows what the reality of the times was as written by newspapers. These media frames can be used to create a framework that can establish an order to which individuals can analyze and learn what to think on events. These media frames that individuals get from reading newspapers become reality to those who have never experienced those events (Goffman, 1974).

Framing theory is closely related to but different than agenda setting and agenda building theories. Agenda setting theory states that mass media may have the power to determine or “set” important issues or an agenda for the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While similar, it is different than framing theory as agenda setting suggests what topics to think about rather than what to think on a topic. Second-level agenda setting theory dives deeper and almost acts as a convergence of framing and agenda setting by assigning attributes and characteristics. However, second-level agenda setting is still

different as it suggests what characteristics to think about and not what to think about those characteristics (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001).

A number of previous studies, primarily in recent years, have examined television broadcasts of the Olympic Games. However, the number of studies addressing Olympic coverage in newspapers is substantially smaller. One study, which focuses on “the social representation of sport for those with disabilities,” examines French and German newspapers’ coverage of the Atlanta Paralympics in 1996 (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001 pg.69). The study showed that French and German newspapers were not interested in covering athletes with disabilities and that only 6% of stories written in the German papers about the events in 1996 were from an actual sports source (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001).

Vincent, Imwold, Johnson, & Massey, (2003) looked for different trends based on newspapers from other countries during the 1996 Olympic games. Examining papers from Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, the author noticed more media coverage was given for females in gender-appropriate sports such as swimming, tennis, and gymnastics while sports such as field hockey and volleyball were covered significantly less. Jones, Murrell, and Jackson (1999) examined two separate Olympic games in 1996 and 1998 through 13 newspapers, finding “female athletes in male sports were described by the print media using frequent male-to-female comparisons and comments that had little to do with sports or the athlete’s performance” (pg. 183). A content analysis of the 2004 Olympic games coverage from the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* examined gender differences in media coverage, finding the two papers showed female coverage to favor team-oriented sports rather than solo stars and

that the women tended to be highlighted in the sports sections rather than cover stories (Pratt, Grappendorf, Grundvig, & LeBlanc, 2008).

A framing analysis of *The New York Times*' online coverage of the 2004 Olympic games shows that coverage of the games, which were held in Athens, Greece, was considered ordinary and traditional (Zaharopoulos, 2007). The study did not look for minorities' coverage at the games, focusing more on what frames were created by *The Times* throughout the event and how often they were used in daily coverage. The media frames identified were conflict frame, economic consequences frame, Olympics returning home frame, and the Olympics as an act of peace and friendship frame (Zaharopoulos, 2007).

In terms of sports framing studies, a number of exciting studies address the way sportswriters cover the games and athletes. Among the frames identified in the studies are the performance frame and the personal or personality frame. If a sports news story is written around a performance-focused frame, defined as a frame that specifically focuses on the "performance of the athlete," then more than likely the featured athletes tend to be framed positively (Lewis & Weaver, 2013 pg. 223). This is due to the fact that "audiences categorize the individual as an 'athlete' and as a result, positively associate that individual with characteristics of other successful athletes" (Lewis & Weaver, 2013 p. 223). Furthermore, personality frames, defined as frames that "place importance on information about the athlete's personal life," were found to give more "likeability" to athletes over performance frames (p. 223). This means that stories that featured performance frames were found to be positive pieces and stories with character frames were more enjoyed by readers.

A study on college football athletes that examined the framing of white and black athletes through sports announcers' commentary found Blacks likely to be characterized as succeeding because of innate athletic talent and Whites because of hard work and making smart decisions (Billings, 2004). Studies also show White athletes are more likely to be framed as being more intelligent than Black athletes (McCarthy & Jones, 1997; Rada, 1996); however, more recently Billings (2010) found Black athletes were not found to be portrayed as inferior in mental skill areas such as concentration or football intelligence.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to look at the extent to which the nation's leading newspapers reflect gender and racial bias in feature stories about Olympic female African American athletes. There is given evidence that African Americans have been presented differently through the media in terms of sport, whether it be through newspapers or television. Based on this information presented, those study seeks to ask the following research questions:

RQ1: Given that African Americans are presented as such, how did these Newspapers present these Olympic athletes?

RQ2: Do the portrayals of these African American females reflect previously identified forms of racial and gender bias?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study analyzed newspaper coverage of three female “History-Making” African American Olympic athletes. The athletes are Debi Thomas, Simone Biles, and Florence Griffith Joyner. Coverage of four newspapers is examined:

1. *The New York Times*
2. *Los Angeles Times*
3. *The Atlanta Constitution*
4. *The Boston Globe*

These papers were selected due to their national prominence, long tenured success, and geographical diversity. Each has been around since at least 1881, with the oldest, *The New York Times*, dating back to 1851. Newspapers were selected as the primary source for this study due to their availability and their ability to capture the era that they are set in. By choosing four papers that are spread throughout the entire United States, this study can address key differences by region in the frames of the athletes.

Because the researcher wanted to capture not only the frames, but also the language used, qualitative content analysis was selected as the methodology for the study. This method was chosen following the guidance of previous communication studies



examining newspapers and photographs qualitatively. A content analysis is systematic method of observing patterns or messages in print media to make inferences on our communication systems (Budd, Thorp & Donohew, 1967). Vincent (2003) says through qualitative content analysis it is possible find inferences on how printed mediums, like a newspaper in this study, covers and portrays female athletes. Vincent examined newspaper clippings of female athletes competing in the 1996 Olympic games, looking for “gender-appropriate” representation.

Furthermore, Kinnick (1998) examined gender bias of female Olympians through a content analysis, using a multi-step coding sheet on newspaper articles to identify trends from the media’s coverage of the 1996 Olympics. Jones, Murrell, and Jackson (1999) also studied media coverage of female Olympians through the use of a content analysis. Their study examined 13 different newspapers’ coverage of the 1996 and 1998 Olympic games, looking for keyword descriptions of stereotypical female traits. The present study follows guidelines set by these studies to conduct a qualitative text analysis that will reveal whether descriptions of racial and gender stereotyping traits are present.

Three resources were used to identify and collect the articles. First, the Newspapers.com website was used to collect articles from *The Atlanta Constitution* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Newspapers.com, a commercial database, is the largest newspaper archive and hosts scanned copies of over 11,000 newspapers from the 1700s to the 2000s. Second, the ProQuest database was used to collect articles from *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. One exception was for *The New York Times* articles on Simone Biles. The ProQuest database only carries issues dating to 2014. Therefore, a

third resource, the official *New York Times* website archives, was used to collect all the articles specifically about Biles.

The timeline and when the Olympic games selected took place include the 1988 Winter games in Calgary, Canada for Debi Thomas, the 1988 Summer games in Seoul, South Korea for Florence Griffith Joyner, and the 2016 Summer games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for Simone Biles. The dates of the papers selected ranged from five days before the opening ceremony to the day after the closing ceremony. This timeframe was selected for two different reasons. First, coverage around the Olympic competitions tends to have an uptick as the press begins coverage of the popular and most likely to win athletes heading in to the games. Also, more editorials and columns will be published leading up to the Olympics, highlighting star athletes expected to succeed. The day after the closing ceremony was chosen because that is when stories and items about the last day of the event typically appear.

A keyword search was conducted for the athlete's first and last name in each of the four newspapers during the time frame for her respective Olympics. However, if the athlete went by a nickname such as "Debi" instead of Debra or "FloJo" those search results were also included.

Articles that just mentioned the athlete's names but did not actually revolve around the athletes were not included. No *Associated Press* pieces were used in this study. The articles used were exclusive and did not reappear in any of the other newspapers.

## **Coding**

The articles were classified into three types; Feature articles, News articles, and Columns. For the purposes of this study, feature articles were defined as articles that address the individual athlete or her life. News articles were defined as articles that give an account and/or analysis of the performance of the athlete following an event. Columns were defined as opinion pieces or commentary on the analysis of an athlete or performance. Because previous studies identified the use of stereotypical language toward African Americans in sports, articles and columns were coded for the presence of such attributes in the language to show racial or gender stereotyping even if it was not the dominant attribute or frame. Therefore, the author was not coding only for frames but if a particular attribute was present as well. The timeline mentioned above allowed for feature articles that would take place prior to the Olympics to be included in the analysis.

Next, using guidance from Billings and Eastman (2003) in their study of gender and race in terms of announcing at the 2002 Olympics, articles were coded into the category of performance, personality, or both, based on their focus of their content. This was deemed an appropriate guide due to the fact this current study as well as Billings and Eastman's involved the athletic competition of the Olympics while analyzing race and gender framing. Performance was defined as articles that reported on an athletic performance. Personality was defined as articles that examined the personality or physicality (not directly attributable to athletic performance) of an athlete.

Next, each story was read multiple times by the author to determine if racial and/or gender stereotypical traits, or attributes, were present. Specifically, based on research that shows media representations of black athletes as superior or animal like, the

articles were examined for keywords that attributed superhuman or human qualities to the athletes to the black female Olympians. The stories were also examined for whether the athlete was presented as likeable or unlikeable. Likeable was defined as “keywords or traits that are pleasant or pleasing to the situation at hand.” Unlikeable was defined as “keywords or traits that are not pleasant or inappropriate for the situation at hand.” The most frequently appearing attributes in a story were considered to be dominant and were labeled as dominant frames. For example, if a news article containing the results of a performance featured six Superhuman descriptions with three human descriptions, the dominant athletic frame would be for that article Superhuman. Furthermore, if the article highlighted 3 “likeable” descriptions in personality and one “unlikeable” description, the dominant personality frame would be “likeable.” This was done so both attributes and frames could be accounted for.

## Coding Sheet

Specifically, the coding took place as follows:

Which paper was the article from: 1= *The Atlanta Constitution* 2= *Los Angeles Times*  
3= *The New York Times* 4= *The Boston Globe*

What type of article: 1=News 2=Feature 3=Column

What is the category of content: 1=Performance 2=Personality 3=Both

The coding then moved on to determine the frame of each article. Frame was defined as the dominant attribute(s) in the article.

Is the Superhuman attribute present? 1 = Yes 2 = No

Is the Human attribute present? 1 = Yes 2 = No

Are both attributes present? 1 = Yes 2 = No

Which athletic attribute is dominant as the frame? 1=Superhuman 2=Human

Is a likeable attribute present? 1 = Yes 2 = No

Is an unlikeable attribute present? 1 = Yes 2 = No

Are both attributes present? 1 = Yes 2 = No

Which personality attribute is dominant as the frame? 1=Likeable 2=Unlikeable

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Simone Biles, Debra Thomas, and Florence Griffith Joyner were all considered the best at their individual sports at the time of their competition in the Olympics but there is much to be learned about how these women were covered by the media at the time. This analysis is meant to dive further into the research questions presented earlier and what evidence from this framing study contributes to the conversation regarding racial and gender stereotyping in the media reporting on sports. In the following results, each research question is stated and immediately answered based on overall data.

#### **Overall Results**

Overall, 111 articles were examined in the four newspapers and deemed to fit the specified timeline and requirements. Only articles written by newspaper staff appeared in the coverage. No wire service articles appeared. The newspaper with the least number of articles examined was *The Boston Globe*, with 23 (20.7%) total. In contrast, the newspaper with the greatest number of articles was the *Los Angeles Times* with 34 (30.6%) total. *The New York Times* pieces and *The Atlanta Constitution* pieces each were 27 (24.3%). Using the newspapers as a proxy for region indicates the west coast had almost 10% more coverage than the east coast in terms of coverage dedicated with more

stories appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* (west region) than any other region. The midwest and east coast regions were relatively balanced in terms of coverage dedicated.

An analysis of the frames and attributes in the articles supported previous literature identifying possible gender stereotyping and racial stereotyping framing in sports coverage.

**RQ1: How did these Newspapers present these female African American Olympic athletes?**

Overall, the results show that a majority of articles, 74 (66.7%), used at least one human attribute while 56 (50.5%) of the articles used at least one superhuman attribute (Table 4.1). Some 48 articles (43.2%) used only the human attribute for athleticism while 30 articles (27%) used only the superhuman attribute for athleticism.

**Table 4.1 Athletic Attributes Present in Papers**

PAPERS EXAMINED	TOTAL # ARTICLES THAT USED A SUPERHUMAN ATTRIBUTE	TOTAL # ARTICLES THAT USED A HUMAN ATTRIBUTE	TOTAL # THAT USED BOTH ATTRIBUTES TOGETHER
ATLANTA CONSTITUTION	15	16	5
LOS ANGELES TIMES	16	20	6
NEW YORK TIMES	14	20	9
BOSTON GLOBE	11	18	6
	<b>TOTAL:</b> 56 (50.5%)	<b>TOTAL:</b> 74 (66.7%)	<b>TOTAL:</b> 26 (23.4%)

Both attributes were present together in 26 (23.4%) of the 111 articles (Table 4.1). This evidence shows that in most cases, these papers either featured one or the other athletic attribute rather than both at the same time. More interesting, perhaps, is that half of the articles used at least one reference to the female black Olympians as superhuman.

**Table 4.2 Dominant Athletic Frame Used in Articles – Superhuman, Human or Non-Applicable**

	<b>Superhuman</b>	<b>Human</b>	<b>Non-Applicable</b>
<b>Simone Biles</b>	<b>29 (69%)</b>	<b>12 (28.6%)</b>	<b>1 (2.4%)</b>
<b>Debra Thomas</b>	<b>9 (24.3%)</b>	<b>22 (59.5%)</b>	<b>6 (16.2%)</b>
<b>Florence Griffith Joyner</b>	<b>11 (34.4%)</b>	<b>20 (62.5%)</b>	<b>1 (3.1%)</b>
	<b>TOTAL: 49 (44.1%)</b>	<b>TOTAL: 54 (48.6%)</b>	<b>TOTAL: 8 (7.2%)</b>

The most frequently appearing attribute in an article was determined to be that article’s dominant frame. The Human frame was dominant in 54 (48.6%) of the articles while the Superhuman frame was dominant in 49 (44.1%). Neither of these two frames appeared in 8 (7.2%) of the articles (Table 4.2). The frames were applied to the female black Olympians at significantly different rates. Writers used Superhuman as the dominant frame for Simone Biles in 29 (69%) of the articles about her. Thomas and Griffith Joyner were most frequently framed as Human, 22 (59.5%) and 20 (62.5%), respectively. Yet, nearly a fourth of Thomas’ articles and a third of Griffith Joyner’s



articles framed them as Superhuman (Table 4.2) The older stories, that appeared in 1988 compared to 2016, tended to use the human athleticism frame, while more recent stories favored the use of the superhuman athleticism frame.

**Table 4.3 Personality Attributes Present in Papers**

PAPERS EXAMINED	ARTICLES FEATURING “LIKEABLE” ATTRIBUTE	ARTICLES FEATURING “UNLIKEABLE” ATTRIBUTE	TOTAL # THAT USED BOTH ATTRIBUTES TOGETHER
ATLANTA CONSTITUTION	18	6	4
LOS ANGELES TIMES	27	13	13
NEW YORK TIMES	19	9	6
BOSTON GLOBE	17	3	3
	<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>TOTAL:</b>
	<b>81 (72.9%)</b>	<b>31 (27.9%)</b>	<b>26 (23.4%)</b>

Results also showed balanced coverage between the newspapers in terms of likeable and unlikeable personality attribute framing with a majority of the articles, 81 (72.9%), of the 111 using likeable as the dominant attribute in terms of personality compared to unlikeable which was present in 31 (27.9%) (Table 4.3). Both attributes were present together in only 26 (23.4%) of the articles. All of the Los Angeles Times and Boston Globe articles that featured an unlikeable attribute, appeared together with a likeable attribute also.

**Table 4.4 Dominant Personality Frame Used in Articles –Likeable, Unlikeable or Non-Applicable**

	<b>Frames</b>		
	<b>Likeable</b>	<b>Unlikeable</b>	<b>Non-Applicable</b>
<b>Simone Biles</b>	<b>28 (66.7%)</b>	<b>1 (2.4%)</b>	<b>13 (31%)</b>
<b>Debra Thomas</b>	<b>27 (73%)</b>	<b>5 (2.3%)</b>	<b>5 (13.5%)</b>
<b>Florence Griffith Joyner</b>	<b>23 (71.9%)</b>	<b>1 (3.1%)</b>	<b>8 (25%)</b>
	<b>TOTAL: 78 (70.2%)</b>	<b>TOTAL: 7 (6.3%)</b>	<b>TOTAL: 26 (23.4%)</b>

As with the athletic attributes, the most frequently appearing attribute in an article was determined to be that article’s dominant frame. The likeable frame was dominant in 78 (70.2%) of the articles while the unlikeable frame was dominant in only 7 (6.3%). Neither of the two frames appeared in 26 (23.4%) articles (Table 4.4).

The frames were applied to the female black Olympians evenly with all three athletes being framed as likeable in more than two thirds of the articles featuring them and unlikeable in no more than 3.1% of the articles featuring them.

The athletes were framed in personality to be “likeable” in almost 71% of the articles examined (Table 4.3), which is most likely due to the fact these are “Olympic Heroes” in the face of the public. In most circumstances, those representing their country are framed positively. Furthermore, this lines up with Lewis and Weaver’s idea of performance pieces, tending to frame athletes more positively (2013). Overall, 84 (75.6%) of the 111 articles covered were or contained performance focus.

## Discussion of Results

### **RQ2: Do the portrayals of these African American females reflect previously identified forms of racial and gender bias?**

Presenting African American athletes using racial stereotype traits showed up in coverage of Debra Thomas' figure skating style, with multiple papers describing her in terms of power and strength compared to rival Katrina Witt's flare. "It's style versus substance, femininity versus athleticism," wrote *Atlanta Constitution* reporter Bud Shaw on the differences between Thomas and Witt (Shaw, 1988a). "You see Debi Thomas in a black body suit, no skirt, a splash of sequins at the top, and you see the distance between these two queens of ice, Witt as a beauty, Thomas as an athlete" wrote David Kindred of *The Atlanta Constitution* (Kindred, 1988). This lined up with previous literature identifying Black women to have been framed in print media racially and sexually different than White women (Cahn, 1994; Hall, 2001; Hardin et al., 2004; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998).

However, despite this idea of superior athleticism, results showed only Simone Biles to show statistical significance in terms of possible overuse of "Superhuman" as the dominant athletic frame used in coverage while Thomas and Griffith Joyner were shown to be possibly used significantly less. Phrases such as "A sky scrapping, jaw dropping floor routine" (Plaschke, 2016), "powerful and perfectly built for the sport" (Plaschke, 2016), and "soared through the air – an unbeatable lightness of being" (Dillman, 2016) were used to describe Biles' individual routine for her first gold medal in the 2016 Summer games.

“Most gymnasts fly, but Biles seems to catapult as if from a rocket launcher,” wrote *Los Angeles Times* columnist Meghan Daum. “Of the many growing adjectives used to describe her skills – ‘untouchable’ ‘ridiculously great’ – the one that comes up most often is ‘effortless’... Biles is a ‘natural’ (quite possibly a supernatural natural)” (Daum, 2016).

Possible explanations for Biles’ significantly larger amount of “superhuman” descriptions could be associated with a few different reasons. First, Biles was the only athlete out of the three in the present study who did not compete in the Olympics in 1988. She was the youngest of all the athletes at the time of competing and was much closer to the present-day version of sport media coverage and sport journalism. Secondly, Biles’ sport was gymnastics, a sport which requires a different set of athleticisms, with feats that are off the ground and in the air as compared to a sport like track and field racing.

However, results from this study indicate journalists are indeed covering female athletes differently in 2016 than in 1988. Women’s fight for equality in sports was still relatively new, although growing, in 1988 with Title IX having been incorporated only in 1972. Thus, interest in women’s sport was far less than today. The present could be considered a golden era of female sports with more professional and collegiate opportunities than ever before. In 2015, tennis star Serena Williams became the first solo female athlete on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* since 1985. The 2015 women’s World Cup Final was the most watched soccer match ever, with the United States team getting 25 different covers of *Sports Illustrated*. Clearly, while there is still focus on women’s bodies, the media are recognizing some female athletes as elite athletes rather than just females competing in sports.

Possible gender stereotyping in the athlete's individual sports was also shown. Issues such as what the athletes wore or would wear were present in articles about Debra Thomas and Florence Griffith Joyner, with stories about Griffith Joyner's one-legged body suit not being allowed in the Olympics. "The burning issue of yesterday's qualifying heats in the women's 100-meter dash at Seoul Olympic stadium was not how fast Florence Griffith Joyner would run, but what she would be wearing," wrote Vince Doria of *The Boston Globe* (Doria, 1988). "Florence Griffith Joyner, 28 used to be known for her long glitzy fingernails and sexy one-legged tights. Now she's known for the nails, the clothes, and for being the fastest woman in the world, with her record shattering, warp-speed time of 10.49 seconds in the 100 meters" (Kort, 1988).

Multiple covers were dedicated to Griffith Joyner's nonconventional sprinter outfits as well, presenting her womanlier. Two covers for the Los Angeles Times highlighted Griffith Joyner's figure, specifically her legs, while another highlighted her putting on makeup before a race. Numerous articles outlined her fashion choice and lacked coverage of her training to prepare for the games and world records. In response to the coverage of her fashion, Griffith Joyner responded saying "I spend about 15 minutes putting on my makeup. I spend a lot longer getting ready for a race" (Shaw, 1988b).

Griffith Joyner appearing womanlier could help explain her lower count of superhuman attributes than someone such as Biles. In the 1988 Summer Olympics, Griffith Joyner set world records that still stand in 2019, for fastest times in the 100-meter and 200-meter races for females. Despite being renowned as one of the fastest individuals on the planet at the time, Griffith Joyner received a lower than expected count statistically for superhuman attributes.

The issue of fashion choice was also shown in cases about Debra Thomas, whose decision to dress down compared to Katrina Witt was examined by reporters. Thomas' decision to dress down rather than "sexier" for her showdown with Katrina Witt went against traditional norms of figure skating, a sport that is linked to beauty and being more female appropriate (Entine, 2000). An interview with the woman who designed both costumes for Thomas and Witt, Lauren Sheehan, was quoted saying how Thomas' more athletic style and outfit went against classical expectations for figure skaters, saying 40 "Everybody who knows Debi knows she wants to be a rock 'n' roll star. Her style is dynamic, athletic" (Gammon, 1988).

Other possible explanations for this could be due to the fact these women were breaking traditional fashion "norms" in their respective sports. Griffith Joyner was known due to her decision to still appear with makeup and fashionable outfits while still on the racing track. This is different from "norms" of athletes in track and field appearing more man-like (Hardin et al., 2004; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). Lastly, both Debra Thomas and Florence Griffith Joyner were covered extensively with rivals or other competitors to compare them to. Debra Thomas' story in the media was the battle between her and Katrina Witt. Florence Griffith Joyner was rivaled in coverage of Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Evelyn Ashford on the same track and field team. It's possible that since there were legitimate competitors to compare to, less superhuman attributes were provided whereas Simone Biles was unrivaled in her success in the 2016 Summer games, winning nearly every event by a large margin and accentuating her athletic feats.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This study addressed framing in sports, particularly in the field of race and gender in sport media coverage. Overall results showed that the four newspapers throughout different regions of the country, were relatively balanced in the amount of times their stories on these Olympic female athletes were framed to be likeable and unlikeable as well as with superhuman and human athletic abilities. Furthermore, papers tended to use either one or the other dominant frames, rather than both at the same time. The older stories, that appeared in 1988 compared to 2016, tended to use the human athleticism frame, while more recent stories favored the use of the superhuman athleticism frame.

This research is important because it can aid current journalists who cover the Olympics. As this and previous research shows, stereotypical racial and gender traits are still used by sports reporters. This research may show journalists how often specific traits have been used, as how much more often they appear to be used now rather than in the 1980's and 1990's. Furthermore, sports journalists walk a difficult balance in describing the feats of top-class athletes in today's current media age. Race and sport are still intertwined and the coverage of race by journalists is a sensitive topic during this era of social media where everyone's thoughts can be seen at any time by any person. Also, as more and more new technology is available to the public to access information, more and

more untrained “journalists” will be reporting on topics such as race and sport as anyone now can be considered a journalist.

This study shows that the existing literature on coverage of African Americans and women in sport is accurate and that there are examples of possible framing issues with the media’s portrayal of their sports and inclusion. Issues such as outfit decisions were noticed in two of the three of the athletes’ timespans. While athleticism was only shown to describe the style for one of these three studied, superhuman characteristics were evident in articles for all three.

This study contributes to framing theory literature by adding frames that may be useful in the study of sports journalism. This data shows significance in the use of superhuman athleticism frames to present Olympic athletes, particularly where race and gender are factors. Women are indeed being covered differently today than in 1988, but remnants of racial and gender stereotyping still play into frames, which can impact how viewers think about and behave toward the larger groups of which the athletes are a part. Gitlin (1980) says "frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters (p. 6)." Knowing this, by analyzing females as athletes rather than just women competing in sport, journalists framing these athletic achievements contribute to changing the image of women in sports.

As advancements for women’s sports continue, more research will be needed to monitor the media coverage. For example, results of this study show that the idea of fashion is still largely relevant in coverage of female sports. What athletes chose to wear, whether it’s a singlet or different hair style, can become a story in the media over training



and preparation for events. Does the same type of coverage occur for men's sports? Studies looking into the amount of coverage dedicated to the clothing and fashion of athletes is recommended in the future. Are athletes who are known for their fashion framed differently or presented differently to the public due to their outspoken stance on fashion?

Furthermore, while seeing women as athletes is an overall positive, overuse of the superhuman attribute in women's sports may be evidence of racial stereotyping. Since there were no white athletes included in the present study, it is not yet known whether that attribute is applied equally to white and black female athletes. Also, matters of framing and portrayal raised by the present study should be addressed in studies exploring media representations of race and gender in all sports, particularly the less physical but more technical sports such as golf or figure skating.

The author suggests future studies as well into this era of coverage in female athletes and the issue of race in sport. Current studies on Olympic media coverage have largely been dedicated to television while the larger amount of research into newspaper Olympic coverage has been before 2000. The author suggests a qualitative content analysis of other historic female African American athletes and their coverage dedicated to them by newspapers, including athletes such as Gabrielle Douglas, Serena Williams, Lolo Jones, and Lisa Leslie. Future research should also address whether the frames found in the present study are prevalent in a greater variety of newspapers as well as broadcast and online media.

### **Limitations for this study**

1. Using Four primary newspapers: Further research should examine a larger amount of papers including *The Washington Post* or *The Chicago Tribune*. This would allow for a larger area of regional coverage.

2. Using Three Olympic athletes: By expanding the number of athletes analyzed, this study could grow to include a larger number of sports or Olympic games rather than the three games and three sports used for this study.

3. Using Single-Person Coding: By using a single-person coding scheme, this thesis evolved closer to an academic exercise and to some, might show results that lack generalizability. However, the author would argue that as a qualitative study, this thesis still serves as a strong first step in the direction of framing studies on the Olympics and sports in general in terms of race and gender.

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