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The Demise of the WNBA in Florida: A Mixed Method Case Study of Newspaper Coverage about Women's Professional Basketball

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The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) is a hot phenomenon on the American sports scene. With its recent popularity, the question has been raised as to whether newspaper coverage of the teams is pivotal to the survival of the fledgling franchises. This study sought to discover if the actual coverage of the Miami Sol and the Orlando Miracle, two now defunct WNBA teams, affected the demise of the franchises.

Our mixed method case study compared a qualitative inquiry (interviews) with an empirical examination of the newspaper coverage. It examined the development of coverage for the two franchises, story placement, the average number of column inches for each story, use of photographs, and story content. It attempted to discover the viewpoints of the beat writers for the two teams at the *Miami Herald* and the *Orlando Sentinel*. Additionally, a perspective was shown of how prevalent the Sol and Miracle public relations directors think their teams' coverage is.

The study examined whether women were depicted as sex objects through commoditization or objectification, whether gender marking was present in the stories, and whether the coverage was written from a female or male perspective.

By examining the newspaper coverage of the most popular women's sport in our country, conclusions were drawn as to whether the sports media has accepted the popularity of women's sports, or whether masculine hegemonic practices of sports editors are still in place.

Introduction:

The conceptual genesis of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), and the "We Got Next" campaign, with the approval of the male dominated NBA Board of Governors, was formally approved on April 24, 1996 amidst great fanfare from women's professional basketball enthusiasts. Shortly thereafter, the new women's league began its trek toward a June 1997 date for its first official tip-off. Many "firsts" soon followed: the league's first commissioner, Val Ackerman, was hired; Lisa Leslie became the first woman to sign a contract; broadcast partnerships with NBC, ESPN, and Lifetime Television were inked; and eight fledgling franchises were initiated throughout the United States.

What didn't follow amidst the hoopla surrounding the new league was extensive media coverage. To examine this phenomenon, a mixed method case study of Florida's two now defunct WNBA franchises, the Orlando Miracle and the Miami Sol, was conducted to show that not only was limited newspaper coverage by the two major newspapers in the teams' coverage areas partially to blame for the two franchises' demise,

but there was also a marked deference by sports editors to existing stereotypes regarding media content decisions.

The Orlando Miracle joined the WNBA as an expansion franchise in 1999. The Miami Sol followed its sister Florida team into the league in 2000. The Miracle lasted four seasons, and compiled a 60-68 record with one playoff appearance before the franchise was transferred to the Connecticut Sun in 2003. The Sol was in existence three years and it amassed a record of 48-48 with one playoff appearance before it was disbanded in 2003.

This study will seek to discover if newspaper coverage by the two respective newspapers, the *Miami Herald* and the *Orlando Sentinel*, contributed to the short tenure of the two ill-fated WNBA teams in the state of Florida. Newspaper coverage of women's professional basketball in the United States has been marginal in the markets where the WNBA competes. Boutilier and SanGiovanni (1983) referred to newspaper coverage of women's sports as ghettoization because sports editors generally treat women's sporting news as essentially not newsworthy. When coverage exists, it is assigned to non-prominent space (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). Some experts believe that sports editors act as gatekeepers and, through their purported biased decision-making, erect barriers to coverage, adversely affecting female participation (Matheson and Flatten, 1996). Others hypothesize that hegemonic theory (Gramsci, 1971; Sage, 1998), or the power to sanction the power and privilege over women in sport (Daddario, 1994), is the basis of the discriminatory coverage exerted by sports editors. The symbiotic relationship between mass media and sport reinforces the importance and power of sport that is embedded in our cultural landscape. However, the mass media is also controlling the institution that creates, reinforces, and perpetuates our society's existing hegemonic order. Graber (1997) stated that the biased process mass media utilizes to determine what will get into print is directly correlated to the reinforcement of existing cultural norms in American society. Stories chosen for prominent coverage are selected on the basis of enforcing and subsequently intensifying the power of the media to reinforce dominant cultural values determined by the elite.

The purpose of the study is to examine the newspaper coverage of the two WNBA teams in light of the previously mentioned hegemonic practices of the sports editors. We began with a qualitative study where the sports editors, beat writers, and team public relations directors were interviewed (questions are presented in Appendix 1). Based on the predominant themes and issues that were revealed by the interviews, we then conducted a content analysis to examine the findings empirically.

Background:

The significance of sports in the United States is illuminated by recent surveys indicating that 30% of the public says it purchases newspapers primarily for the sports section. In several major market newspapers, nearly 50% of the non-advertising space is devoted to sports, which has five times the readership of any other section (Sage, 1990). It can be presupposed that media coverage of women's sporting endeavors is a critical issue related to the future development of women's sport for variety of reasons; the media plays a central role in creating the public profile and image of women's sport; the media has the power to provide role models for other sportswomen, or women who may take part in sport; and media coverage, particularly television exposure, is often a major factor in securing commercial sponsorship (The Sports Council, 1995).

Historical analysis implies that the relationship between sport and the mass media is one of mutual interdependence and of reciprocal

influence. Therefore, if the media has become the lens through which sporting images are portrayed, and is the convex mirror through which everything is reflected, then it can be claimed that sport and the mass media are inextricably linked in a mutually beneficial relationship (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1983).

Lever and Wheeler's (1984) content analysis of sports pages of the *Chicago Tribune* from 1900 to 1975 found that women's sports coverage in 1900 was 1.2% of the total paper. The coverage expanded to 4% between 1925 and 1950, but grew to only 7.1% by 1975. In an analysis of five newspapers, Woolard (1983) found that only 15% of the sports sections contained coverage of women's sports. A recent content analysis of USA Today, The (*Nashville*) *Tennessean*, and the *New York Times* from 11 March to 7 April 1996 revealed that female athletes received a meager 11% of sport coverage (Huggins, 1996).

A recent study of the *New York Times*' coverage of the 1995 women's and men's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball tournaments confirmed that female athletes are receiving less coverage and are being framed as the "other" athletes (Silverstein, 1996). Silverstein conducted a quantitative and qualitative comparison of the newspaper's coverage of the three-week event, including the number and length of articles, the size of photos and graphics, and the placement in the paper and sports section. The quantitative results indicated that there were three times as many articles, photos, and graphics on the men's tournament as on the women's, and there were eighteen features on male players and six on their coaches, compared to two on female players and four on their coaches. Further, the study found that men's articles appeared on the front page of the sports section thirty-one times compared with four women's articles. The qualitative findings revealed that the women's tournament was framed as the "other" tournament, compared with the "real" tournament played by men.

The importance of newspaper photographs is underscored by the fact that photos are among the first news items to catch the reader's eye. They often help to establish the context or frame of reference from which the reader interprets the accompanying story (Miller, 1975). Numerous content analyses of photographs in newspapers have found female athletes to be under-represented. For example, Miller (1975) conducted a content analysis of the photographs in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* and found that males dominated the sport sections of both papers. The ratios of photos of men to photos of women were 16:1 (*Washington Post*) and 9:1 (*Los Angeles Times*). Lee (1992) also discovered disparity when examining the photographs of female/male athletes participating in the 1984 and 1988 Summer Olympic Games. The ratio of photos of Olympic male athletes to those of Olympic female athletes was 2.2:1 in *The Global and Mail*, compared to 2.6:1 in the *New York Times*. Newspaper coverage of female athletes is often found in less prominent pages and sections. Bryant (1980) found that the location of articles about women's sports was either the fourth and fifth or last pages of the sports section.

In summary, despite increasing opportunities and growing social awareness and acceptance for women participating in sport, research on media representation of women in sport in the U.S. has generally found that female athletes are under-reported. Often, the coverage is clouded by traditional, outdated, sexist coverage in electronic and print media.

Methods:

This study utilized a mixed methodology. We developed a list of questions to utilize in interviews with the sports editors and the assigned beat writers from the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Miami Herald*.

Additionally, the public relations directors for the Miracle and Sol were queried to determine the attitudes, perceptions, and motivations on media coverage of women's pro basketball in Florida. Next, we summarized our findings and conducted a comprehensive two-year content analysis of the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Miami Herald* to search for differences in the volume of actual stories and photographs related to the Sunshine State's two (now former) WNBA franchises.

Sample:

Three distinct sampling decisions were used to conduct a content analysis study (Berelson, 1952). The first decision involves selecting the titles (specific newspapers). For this study, the purposive sampling technique was used. This technique involves the researcher choosing the sample based on the newspapers (titles) having similar characteristics, such as circulation and readership profiles. The second sampling decision relates to the issues or dates of the titles. In this study, the dates of the newspapers to be studied coincide with the dates of the 2000 and 2001 WNBA seasons, including two weeks prior to the beginning of the games and a week after the season concluded (May 1 2000- September 2 2000, and April 30, 2001 - September 2, 2001). The final sampling decision is the content to be coded from the newspapers. For the purpose of this study, the content to be coded included the front page of the newspapers, the front page of the sports section, and the entire sports section in both newspapers.

A sample of the two WNBA franchises in Florida, the Orlando Miracle and the Miami Sol, were selected for the current study to scrutinize trends in media coverage of relatively new teams in well-established sports metropolises. These newspapers were chosen because they are the largest periodicals in the respective cities of the teams. The Miami Herald is the most popular daily newspaper in Miami, with a daily circulation of 326,410, and a Sunday circulation of 441,564. This study investigates its coverage of the Miami Sol in its first two seasons in the WNBA. The Orlando Sentinel is the only daily newspaper in Orlando, with a daily circulation of 256,278, and a Sunday circulation of 378,172. The study investigates its coverage of the Orlando Miracle in its second and third seasons in the WNBA.

Qualitative Analysis:

We first compiled an interview schedule (list of questions), used to format extensive personal interviews with the sports editors and beat writers who collaborate in the decision-making process on the volume of media coverage of the Miami Sol and the Orlando Miracle. The public relations directors of both teams, who by the nature of their job descriptions were responsible for attempting to coax additional column inches for their respective organizations out of the sports editors, were also interviewed.

Qualitative research has several key characteristics that make it a valuable asset in collecting rich personal data directly from subjects. McMillan (2000) notes several key characteristics of qualitative research: 1) data collected in a natural setting, 2) direct data collection, 3) rich narrative descriptions, 4) process orientation (a process through which the data is collected), 5) inductive data analysis (generalizations inducted from synthesizing gathered data), 6) participant perspectives, and 7) emergent research design (entering the study with no preconceived notions about the subjects' attitudes).

The specific methodology employed in the study is ethnography, or a qualitative research project whose purpose is rich description from an 'emic,' or insider's perspective. Rooted in anthropology, ethnography is a

process by which the researcher seeks to discover cultural meanings from the data. The ethnographer identifies themes and patterns beyond the mere reporting of events and details, and seeks to provide an explanation of the sporting world in which we live.

Three methods of collecting data are common to ethnographic studies - participant observation, interviews, and analysis of documents (McMillan, 2000). In the study, two of these techniques were used - personal interviews and content analysis. The interviews were conducted with the three primary actors in the professional media context: the newspapers' sports editors, the beat writers assigned by the papers to cover the teams, and the PR directors employed by the WNBA teams. The content analysis provided empirical data directly from the newspaper stories written about the Miracle and the Sol for the 2000 and 2001 seasons.

To insure the validity of the interviews, a semi-structured format was selected. Using McMillan's (2000) information on formulating interviews, the researchers established contact with the subjects prior to the interviews to give them a general idea of the basic topics to be covered. The interviewer then let the interview process with all three subjects flow from the responses of the subject. Follow-up questions were asked if the collected information warranted.

The ethnographic approach provided a detailed analysis of the attitudes, perceptions, and motivations related the selection of and attempts to influence media coverage of the two teams. The team's PR directors (PR area), beat reporters (newspaper staff writers), and sport editors (newspaper management) were the interview sample.

McMillan (2000) states this type of interview is utilized with individuals possessing insight and understanding into the problem. For the study, the key informant interview was used because the six people interviewed were experts on the respective subject areas, as detailed by their positions of employment.

Results:

An initial e-mail was sent to each of the potential interviewees. It included suggested questions, but also requested that they consider their thoughts about media coverage of the team they either worked for or covered as a member of the media. After receiving a confirmatory response from each person with an agreement to participate in the interview, each of the subjects was telephoned.

Following the interviews, data transcription occurred, and a comprehensive examination was performed to determine if thematic patterns could be found. First, an analysis of the responses from the team public relations directors depicted consistent coverage of both the Sol and the Miracle in both markets. Both PR directors concurred that they believed their teams should receive more coverage than was allocated by the respective hometown paper. A "grain of salt" explanation must be referenced because PR people have an understandable bias toward their teams, and would like to see more coverage in the local newspaper. In trying to determine the value of the team in the sport landscape (Is it a legitimate sporting entity, or an alternative sport offering like the X Games?), the PR directors were queried as to the teams' position in the market. Both firmly believed the WNBA is a legitimate entry into professional sports and has a long-term future.

Both the Sol and Miracle PR directors responded to a question about their relationships with the beat writers and sports editors in a positive manner. In their opinions, both beat writers were genuinely interested in

covering the teams, and were not there because they had been assigned to the beat. They reported that their relationships with their respective sports editors were cordial and professional, but mentioned that the editors viewed the WNBA team as just another entry-level sport that should be placed in the second tier of sports coverage. The results from the content analysis of the *Miami Herald* and the *Orlando Sentinel* clearly showed that both WNBA teams received extensive coverage in June at the beginning of the season. However, the column inch count from both newspapers showed a significant drop once professional football training camps began in late July.

A highly entrenched tier system of media coverage is one phenomenon that emerged from the research. Interviews with the sports editors revealed that they placed coverage of the 'Big 4' pro teams (baseball, basketball, football, and hockey) first before making any other space allocations. The WNBA fell into the second tier, which puts it on a parallel with college sports, minor professional sports, and entities like major league soccer, pro tennis, golf, and other events that occur periodically through the year. Related to the tier system, both editors concurred that when the month of July started and professional football training camps opened, a manifest decline in WNBA coverage occurred. The primary reason the WNBA season is played in the summer is to avoid conflict with three of the four 'Big 4' sports. The content analysis results clearly showed that when football pre-season training camp began, the column inch count of the WNBA plummeted. One beat writer bluntly stated, "When the 'Fins' begin, the space goes."

The PR directors also surmised that media coverage was poor in half of the twelve WNBA cities, and that their spaces in the local Florida papers were better than the majority of the league. One PR director noted that the 2001 league champion Los Angeles Sparks received minimal exposure in the *Los Angeles Times* until they were deep into the league playoffs.

From the PR directors' perspective, the primary obstacle to more team coverage is the sports editor. If the sports editor takes a personal interest in the team, the coverage increases. If an editor was only marginally interested, the teams would receive the same coverage as a second tier fringe sport. However, the PR people deduced that the mere existence of the league shows that "baby steps" have been taken in the drive to obtain more space in print media for women's pro basketball.

Second, interviews with the beat writers of the two teams provided crystal clarity into the issue of media coverage of women's pro basketball. A surprise to the researchers was that both beat writers were hired specifically to cover the WNBA teams. In the past, sports editors assigned the "unwanted" beat to a less-experienced writer. For the Sol and the Miracle, the beat writers had either covered women's pro basketball in another city or had been major college women's basketball writers. These factors indicate that the sports editors were taking a professional approach to WNBA coverage and were not relegating it to the third tier of coverage (for example, high schools, outdoors, bowling, or running).

The beat writers both noted that coverage of the team dropped off after the All-Star break (mid-July). This confirms the hypothesis mentioned by the PR directors that the beginning of pro football training camp signals a drop in space allotment for women's basketball. One writer mentioned that the sports editor sent out an e-mail that said there would be fewer team notebooks (notes columns), less game advances, and shorter team stories. One writer said space would not improve for WNBA coverage under the current sports editor.

Obstacles to better coverage noted by the beat writers were the national economy (fewer ads mean fewer pages, and less available space), newspaper cutbacks for economical reasons, lots of competition for space in the sports world (there are hundreds of sports events going on all over the nation each day), an uphill battle for respectability for women's professional basketball, and a fight inside the newspaper to make change happen. Solutions to those obstacles noted by the beat writers were: 1) winning - teams must win consistently to force coverage to happen; 2) teams proving themselves to the sports editors through increased attendance, emails/letters to the editor, general public interest; 3) convincing newspaper management that they can sell more papers by attracting new readers; and 4) convincing management that the WNBA is a solid professional sports commodity worthy of more coverage.

Third, the interviews with the sports editors were consistent with the supposition that newspaper readers prefer the 'Big 4.' Both sports editors responded that this alleged demand heavily influenced their editorial decisions. The editors of both the *Miami Herald* and the *Orlando Sentinel* stated that the start of football season is a defining factor in the coverage of the WNBA. When questioned about their space allocation policy for assigning space for second tier sports, both sports editors said that consistency in coverage was important. They tried to cover the team with a regular beat writer and allotted space for notebooks, advances, and feature stories. However, the content analysis study shows that coverage was consistent until July, but dropped systematically in both cities simultaneously. The sports editors pointed to smaller paper sections in the summer when there are fewer sports actually in season and space is limited. Both papers routinely rotated the Sol or the Miracle to page one of the sports section, but the content analysis showed that coverage in the Miami Herald was superior in its coverage of the WNBA.

Content Analysis:

A content analysis of the selected newspapers was employed to quantitatively examine the coverage of the 2000 and 2001 WNBA seasons. "Content analysis is fundamentally empirical in orientation, exploratory, concerned with real phenomena, and predictive in intent" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 9). Berelson (1952) lists seventeen uses of content analysis, including three that frame this study: (1) to describe trends in communication content; (2) to construct and apply communication standards; and (3) to reflect attitudes, interests, and values ("cultural patterns") of population groups.

Content analysis is "a method for examining the message or content of the media, such as newspapers, in order to draw inferences about encoding and decoding practices of the communication system (Rintala & Birrell, 1984, p. 232). Through content analysis, it should be possible to draw inferences about how a printed medium like a newspaper treats female athletes or how the media commits itself to coverage of female subjects (Vincent, 2000).

In content analysis studies, content, or as it is sometimes called, face validity, is normally relied upon. Content validity is usually established through the informed judgment of the researchers. It is often assumed that a measure self-evidently measures what it is supposed to if the categories are rigidly defined and the coding has a high degree of reliability (Vincent, 2000).

The units of analysis in this study for all print and photograph space were square inches and simple number counts. When either an article or a photograph began above the newspaper's fold and then wrapped to the bottom, it was coded as if it began at the top of the page.

This study utilized one primary coder and one assistant who scanned the newspapers during each day of the two WNBA seasons for both teams. Therefore, there is a risk that the coders introduced bias because the task of imputing documents into the categories of analysis is largely a subjective process. An example of a subtle coder bias would be a coder's understanding of the categories shifting over time, resulting in inconsistent coding. Another possible bias would occur if the coder prejudged the outcome of the research. To avoid introducing these kinds of bias and thus invalidating the study, a coder and assistant worked in close collaboration. Another method that was used in this study was re-coding of the data after a span of time (intra-observer agreement). This method will identify any problems deriving from inconsistency in coding, but will not identify researcher-induced bias.

Results:

Chi-square tests were used to compare the obtained distributions from the categorical data. Chi-square tests are appropriate when both variables are essentially categorical, making it impossible to carry out usual inferences in terms of means or variances (Hays, 1988). In addition to Chi-square tests, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to describe the differences in the metric dependent variable means among the newspapers.

Frequencies, means, and standard deviations for all variables of the local team coverage in the *Miami Herald* and the *Orlando Sentinel* are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

The *Herald* newspaper coverage of the local team was greater than the *Sentinel* coverage in column inches of stories, column inches of photographs, presence of a story, front-page tease, front page of the sports section, general locations of stories in the sports section, and presence of stories above the fold.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Local Team (Metric Variables)

| DV | Presence of a story this day | Standard Deviation in Parentheses | | | Page no. A/B in sports the fold |
|------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| | | Front page tease | Sports page highlight | Page no. A/B | |
| 2000 | Miami (125) | 90(72%) | 4(3.2%) | 45(36%) | 2-5: 1 (.8%) A: 58 6-10: 62 (46.4%) B: 32 (49.6%) 11-20: 9 (25.6%) (7.2%) |
| Orlando (125) | 74(59.2%) | 4(3.2%) | 30(24%) | 2-5: 43 (34.4%) A: 61 (48.8%) 6-10: 29 (23.2%) B: 11 (8.8%) 11-20: 1 (.8%) | |
| X^2 | $X^2 = 4.538$ p= .033 | X^2 (df=1) = .00 p=1.0 | X^2 (df=1) = 4.286 p= .038 | X^2 (3) = 58.467 p<.001 | |
| Total Year (250) | 164(65.6%) | 8(3.2%) | 75(30%) | 2-5: 44 (17.6%) A: 119 (47.6%) 6-10: 91 (36.4%) B: 43 (17.2%) 11-20: 10 | |

| | | | | (4%) | |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 2001 | Miami (125) | 95(76%) | 7 (5.6%) | 57 (45.6%) | 2-5: 48 (38.4%) 6-10: 36 (28.8%) 11-20: 11 (8.8%) A: 66 (52.8%) B: 29 (23.2%) |
| Orlando | (125) | 74(59.2%) | 1(.8%) | 13(10.4%) | 2-5: 0 (0%) 6-10: 91 (72.8%) 11-20: 0 (0%) A: 61 (48.8%) B: 13 (10.4%) |
| χ^2 | | χ^2 (df=1) =8.054 p=.005 | χ^2 (df=1) =4.469 p=.031 | χ^2 (df=1) =38.413 p<.001 | χ^2 (3)= 83.069 p<.001 |
| Total Year (250) | | 169(67.6%) | 8(3.2%) | 70(28%) | 2-5: 48 (19.2%) 6-10: 127 (50.8%) 11-20: 11 (4.4%) A: 127 (50.8%) B: 42 (16.8%) |

Table 2. Frequencies of the Non-Metric Dependent Variables for the Local Team

| DV | Standard Deviation in Parentheses | Column inches of story | Column inches of photos |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2000 | | | |
| Orlando (125) | | | |
| 2001 | | | |
| Orlando (125) | | | |
| Average Years 00' + 01' | | | |
| Orlando (250) | | | |
| Average NP 00' + 01' | | | |
| Orlando (250) | | | |
| Average NP*Year | | | |
| 16.24 | | | |
| Orlando (250) | | | |
| 11.61 | | | |

Discussion:

At the heart of the qualitative part of this analysis of the two Floridian newspapers, equal coverage of the local team, as well as the WNBA league, were expected. The data indicates that the *Miami Herald* coverage of the Miami Sol was significantly higher than that of the *Orlando Sentinel* of the Orlando Miracle. However, the coverage of the WNBA league as a whole was equal in both cities.

The results of the content analysis showed that there was a significant difference in coverage between the Miami Sol and the *Orlando Miracle* in the two newspapers. The explanation for this difference could be found in interviews with the beat writer and sports editor of the Miami Herald. Both interviewees indicated a firm commitment to covering the team on a wide basis. The beat writer was hired specifically from another newspaper to cover the team, and the space commitment allotted the team by the sports editor was shown to be much greater when compared

to that of the Orlando Miracle by the *Orlando Sentinel*.

The analysis of the interviews with the PR directors, beat writers, and sports editors presented a poignant picture of the status of women's professional basketball in relation to newspaper coverage in Florida. The stumbling block appears to be the sports editors, who have the difficult task of satisfying the voracious space appetite of the 'Big 4' while trying to balance the shifting public attitude toward the acceptance of women's professional basketball.

Fink (1998) concluded that a sports establishment determined to preserve existing societal norms has long made newspaper coverage decisions. The image of female athletes is "in the hands of the media," and the media has the power to influence societal thoughts and attitudes. With that in mind, Coakley (1998) stated that the primary dynamic in the filtering of news content is the sports editor. Within this process, preference is deferred to images and messages consistent with the dominant ideologies of society.

Studies have shown that 90% of sports editors in the United States are male (Duncan & Messner, 1998). Combining Fink's (1998) thought that newspaper coverage preserves societal norms, or rather, the major male professional sports dominate the sports pages, with the fact that newsrooms are markedly male, it is easy ascertain a pattern explaining why coverage of a women's professional league would fall into the second tier.

The study's findings showed that only 5% of the sports sections were dedicated to the coverage of the respective WNBA teams during the 2000 and 2001 seasons. The qualitative section of the study showed women's professional basketball has been relegated to "second tier" status by the sports editors of the papers. These findings are similar to that of Silverstein (1996), who revealed that women's tournaments were purported to be the "other" tournament, while the men were playing the "real" tournament.

Conclusions:

The critical societal issues addressed in this study are directly related to the hegemonic and biased decision-making of sports editors in determining coverage of women's professional basketball. Rintala and Birrell (1984) noted that people are strongly influenced by what they 'hear, see, or read' in the mass media. The content analysis study of the *Miami Herald* and the *Orlando Sentinel* revealed a discernable pattern of media coverage that was directly correlated with the purported tier system of sports assigned by the sports editors. Following the analysis of the actual content from two full seasons of newspaper coverage of the two WNBA teams, interview questions for the sports editors, beat writers, and public relations directors for the two respective teams were formulated. After transcription of the interviews, the data were analyzed and specific patterns of behavior by the sports editors emerged.

The sports editors at both the *Herald* and the *Sentinel* confirmed that the primary factor in the decision-making process for space allocation in the sports section is men's professional sports. They cited "what the readers' want" as their justification. However, neither editor could provide exact market research to confirm this process. Neither editor specifically stated that women's pro basketball did not warrant more coverage. Quite the contrary, our content analysis of column inch count, placement of the stories, and the selection and size of photographs from both papers showed that early in the season (June and early July), the Sol and Miracle did receive a fair share of coverage. The percentage was higher during these months than any other entity (with the exception of professional

baseball in Miami). However, a clear line of demarcation appeared the same day the Miami Dolphins opened pre-season training camp.

Ultimately, the primary reason for the departure of Florida's two WNBA was money, or the lack thereof. Official attendance figures (Table 3) for the four seasons of the Miracle and three seasons of the Sol indicate different results. The Sol was consistently in the middle of the WNBA in attendance, with a three-year average of 8,556 (Women's Basketball Online, 2005). The Miracle, however, was near the bottom of league figures with a four-year average of 7,873. By contrast, the Washington Mystics led the WNBA in attendance three of the four years that the two franchises played, with an average of 15,589. The WNBA does not release official financial results, but media estimates indicate a multi-million dollar loss per season for each franchise.

Table 3. Official WNBA Attendance Figures - 1999-2002, WNBA Attendance, www.womensbasketballonline.com

| Year | Team | Games | Attendance | Average | League Rank | League Leader |
|------|---------|-------|------------|---------|-------------|-------------------------|
| 2002 | Miracle | 16 | 113,837 | 7,115 | 13 (16) | Wash. Mystics 16,202 |
| | Sol | 16 | 141,252 | 8,828 | 7 (16) | |
| 2001 | Miracle | 16 | 118,874 | 7,430 | 12 (16) | NY Liberty 15,660 |
| | Sol | 16 | 141,717 | 8,857 | 6 (16) | |
| 2000 | Miracle | 16 | 117,810 | 7,363 | 11 (16) | Wash. Mystics 15,258 |
| | Sol | 16 | 127,721 | 7,983 | 9 (16) | |
| 1999 | Miracle | 16 | 153,366 | 9,585 | 6 (16) | Wash. Mystics 15,306 |

It cannot be definitively concluded that newspaper coverage was the principal factor that led to the demise of Florida's two WNBA teams. However, the results of the content analysis of the *Miami Herald* and the *Orlando Sentinel*, in combination with our qualitative inquiry (interviews), clearly show that the space allocation decisions by the sports editors was a major contributing factor. Can it be surmised that if WNBA coverage was allotted on a tier one basis for the Sol and Miracle, that attendance would have increased, revenues would increase exponentially, and the two squads could still be playing in Florida?

Future research needs to be conducted to substantiate and confirm the hypothesis that sports editors subjugate coverage of women's professional basketball to a second tier assignment, which in turn directly affects the attendance at games. Other research should center on examining coverage of the WNBA in all league cities to establish if there is a direct connection between WNBA coverage and space allocation.

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Appendix 1:

Interview Questions for Team PR Directors:

1. What is the sports editor's philosophy of women's professional basketball coverage?
2. What importance does the newspaper staff put on the WNBA team?
3. How are space allocation decisions done in relation to other sports entities (Big 4, tier two, and tier three sports)?
4. What is your relationship with the beat writer and the sports editor?
5. What is your interest level of the beat writer (high, medium, low, or just another beat)?
6. What is the level of freedom of beat writers to pitch story ideas?
7. What is your interaction with newspaper management?
8. What is your background in PR and experience with women's basketball?
9. What are your perceptions of the WNBA, management, team, players, and the future for the league?
10. What is your attitude toward controversial issues facing the WNBA?
11. How are the majority of stories on the team generated (press releases, contact with beat writers/sports editors, other)?
12. Do you believe a paradigm shift in the coverage of women's basketball is occurring in this country?

Interview Questions for Beat Writers:

1. What is your philosophy on the coverage of women's professional basketball?
2. What is your professional background in sports writing?
3. How are the space allocations established for women's pro basketball at your paper?
4. Is this a coveted beat for you?
5. How/why did you get this beat?
6. Do you have the freedom to freelance on story ideas?
7. What is your interaction with the PR person from the team?
8. What is your interaction with team management, coaches, and players?
9. What is the emphasis of the WNBA within the sports staff at the paper?
10. Does the sports staff at the paper recognize the value of the WNBA as a sports entity worthy of coverage?
11. Do you enjoy covering the team?
12. What are your perceptions of the WNBA, the team, and management?
13. What is your attitude toward the controversial issues surrounding the WNBA?
14. What are your predictions/perceptions of what the future holds for media coverage of the WNBA?

Interview Questions for Sports Editors:

1. What is upper management's philosophy of coverage of women's professional basketball?
2. Is the WNBA considered a second tier sport in the paper's coverage philosophy?
3. What is your personal philosophy in the coverage of women's pro basketball?
4. Is there a difference in the coverage of other second tier sports and women's pro basketball?
5. What is your professional background in journalism?
6. What factors must be considered when deciding space allocation for coverage of the local WNBA team?
7. How were the beat writers assigned to the teams?
8. Will the beat writers be able to submit story ideas and notebook content without the prior approval of the sports editor?
9. What is the interest level of the beat writer in the team?
10. What is your relationship with the team PR person, team management, coaches, and players?
11. How many WNBA games did you attend last season?
12. What is your overall perception of the WNBA as a whole? Was it professionally organized, is there a significant interest in continuing the league, and have you had contact with the league office in New York?
13. What is your attitude toward the controversial issues connected with the WNBA?
14. What are your perceptions of the future of the WNBA and women's professional basketball?
15. Do you think there is a gradual shift in the coverage of women's pro basketball in this country?

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