

Show me the money: Gender equity in sport prize awards

Well, my philosophy has always been that until all of us have made it, none of us has made it.

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When Marnie McBean and Kathleen Heddle crossed the finish line first in the final of the women’s double sculls at the Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996, little did they know what impact their participation in sport would have on women and girls across Canada. Of course, Marnie and Kathleen were only part of the story.

The big story that year was that Canada’s 307 athletes brought home 22 medals. What made fewer headlines was that for the first time in Canadian Olympic history, the female athletes (154) outnumbered the male athletes (153) reflecting just how far women had come in the first 100 years of the modern games.

What does that have to do with equity among genders in sport prize awards?

The 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games—including everything from the outstanding performances by Canadian women to the global media coverage—are credited with sparking a wave of interest in sport among women and girls across Canada. This, in turn, has opened doors for female athletes in almost every sport. You would think that women had “leveled the playing field”. In many respects, they have. But when it comes to prize money at the end of the day, women still have some catching up to do.

So, what’s the big deal?

Despite positive advancements for women in sport, there are still factors that serve to undervalue the women’s game. Among them: minimal media coverage of events relative to the number of women and girls who participate in them, and the fact that there are fewer professional women’s leagues than men’s leagues. Another factor is the amount of prize money available to female athletes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of men’s prize money versus women’s prize money.

Men’s McCains’ Skins Curling*	\$105,000.00	vs.	\$85,000.00	Women’s JVC Skins Curling*
Men’s Samsung Golf Championships	\$150,000.00	vs.	\$50,000.00	Women’s Whirlpool Golf Championships
Men’s FIVB Pro Beach Volleyball	\$150,000.00	vs.	\$150,000.00	Women’s FIVB Pro Beach Volleyball
Men’s Master Series Tennis	\$2,450,000.00	vs.	\$1,080,000.00	Women’s duMaurier Open Tennis
Men’s PGA Bell Canadian Open	\$3,100,000.00	vs.	\$1,200,000.00	Women’s LPGA duMaurier Classic
Men’s Cycling Canadian Cup Series*	\$1,805.00	vs.	\$1,045.00	Women’s Cycling Canadian Cup Series*
Men’s National Beach Volleyball*	\$15,000.00	vs.	\$15,000.00	Women’s National Beach Volleyball*
Men’s Ironman Canada*	\$35,500.00	vs.	\$35,500.00	Women’s Ironman Canada*
Men’s Canadian 8-ball Billiards	\$7,200.00	vs.	\$3,550.00	Women’s Canadian 8-ball Billiards

* Canadian dollars

Prize money—or, more specifically, the amount of prize money—immediately tags an event with a certain amount of value or credibility. The amount can signal not only the quality of the competition, but also the value of the athlete. Events with bigger purses often get more media attention, sparking greater public interest. This interest promotes reinvestment into the sport resulting in continued attention.

It is important for women to be provided with an equitable allocation in prize money because it indicates an appreciation for their efforts and performance. Women's sport is a unique interpretation of sport that does not want to be defined and compared to masculine ideals but praised for the talent and excitement that the woman's game provides.

But women and men are different

Yes, but for how long?

Women—whose achievements in sport over the past two decades have been staggering—are constantly in pursuit of male athletic records. In fact, at the rate female athletes are improving physiologically, it has been predicted that women may one day surpass men in athletic capabilities. The belief that women are naturally inferior is a gross generalization. In reality, women tend to have greater flexibility, a greater percentage of body fat, and a smaller body frame which put them at an advantage in sports such as marathon running, long-distance swimming and gymnastics. It is becoming increasingly evident that opportunity, and not genetics alone, will make an athlete.

Where do we stand?

There is a wide array of philosophies and strategies for awarding prize money at events in Canada. Some events allocate money according to the athlete's placing. Other events hand out prize money according to the number of entrants participating each year. Some organizations have taken a proactive approach to the issue by legislating equal prize money distribution as a part of the event rules and regulations making a conscious effort to recognize equally both the female and male competitors equally for their achievements. For example, Triathlon Canada and Volleyball Canada have prize money percentage breakdowns listed to regulate their events in Canada. Other sports such as dogsled racing or equestrian show jumping are unique in that female and male athletes actually compete against one another—women and men are recognized equitably.

There is still considerable inequity in professional sports. While female golfers and tennis players seem to be fairing well, in reality, the prize money they take home is significantly less than that won by men in those sports.

It should be mentioned that although prize money for female athletes in tennis has been rising, so too have headlines. The trend toward the sexualization and objectification of female athletes is worrisome given that these women are role models for young girls and women.

Currently, women are trying to sell their sport in an effort to compete for corporate dollars. However, it is important for female athletes and event organizers to ask: what, exactly, are they trying to sell? Often corporations are looking for sexual images that end up not only playing into gender stereotypes, but also trivialize the women's game. The focus on beauty is a conflicting and damaging image for women who are trying to break free from the slim, model stereotypes

and increase the acceptance of the strong and athletic female body.

Because men's and women's professional leagues are administrated separately, it is difficult to achieve equity. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to promote the value of the women's game and the merits of funding women's sport, through external quantifiable measures such as prize money.

What more can be done?

The good news is that despite existing inequities, there is evidence that equitable prize money in Canada can be achieved. It remains a matter of educating and encouraging existing organizations to follow the good examples set by others. However, to achieve this goal, two important barriers must be addressed.

First, it's also a matter of getting television coverage. Television has been identified as the most powerful force affecting the business of sport. It is becoming increasingly important for women to capture media coverage because without its associated revenue and the corporate dollars that often flow to attractive, publicized events, it is difficult to increase prize money and event funding. Without improved prize money, the message that the women's game is not worthy or valuable will continue.

Second, the equity regulations in Canada apply only to sporting organizations funded by the government. Until organizations not funded by the government are held accountable, it is our duty as athletes, coaches, parents and administrators to provide alternatives to achieving equity. If a sport or event is not willing to adopt regulations that legislate equal prize money, perhaps it can be encouraged to adopt a system in which the top winners in both the women's and men's events or comparable fields receive equitable prize money. If one field is larger, the remainder of the money can be awarded deeper into the field of competitors. It is a matter of adopting a philosophy that recognizes the best women and the best men in their respective fields.

For high-performance athletes, the adoption of the principle of equal prize money may provide the incentive and recognition that will encourage more female athletes to compete—especially given the endorsement and sponsorship dollars that may result.

As with all inequitable situations, the inequitable allocation of prize money will not change unless the event organizers feel there is a need to change. If you see an inequitable situation, voice your opinion. There is strength in numbers and it is our collective voice that may finally set the wheels in motion. Steady improvements have been gained but women and men must continue to work together to improve the status of sport and women in Canada.

This article is based on a research paper produced by Sharon Laurie for CAAWS. For additional information on women and sport, please contact the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) at (613) 562-5667 or email caaws@caaws.ca or visit CAAWS on the Internet at www.caaws.ca.