

# Reframing the Business Case for Women's Professional Sports

Roberta Bowman, Chief Brand and Communications Officer, LPGA

We've all heard the numbers: "Less than 1% of global investment in corporate sports sponsorships is directed to women's sports!" "Just 4% of sports media coverage is about women's sports."<sup>2</sup>

Yet according to recent Nielsen research, nearly 85% of general sports fans in their largest sports markets say they're interested in women's sports. And about 65% of the population is interested in at least one's women's sport.<sup>3</sup>

For corporate sponsors, women's sports leagues and the media, this feels like an opportunity disguised as a problem. In fact, at the LPGA, more new sponsors have signed on over the past few years than at any other time in our 70-year history.

Why is that? The athletes and women's sports leagues are doing their part. The quality of competition, coupled with engaging personalities, is creating compelling sports and entertainment. The FIFA Women's World Cup showcases the amazing physical abilities and mental stamina of the world's best female soccer players. The WNBA recently announced an exciting new media partner to bring more fans to the game. There's Serena Williams' dominance in tennis, Simone Biles' athletic artistry in gymnastics, Chloe Kim's youthful energy in snowboarding and so on. For the LPGA, a defining moment for our sport



LPGA stars like Lexi Thompson (above) use their social channels to thank tournament sponsors and give fans a glimpse inside Tour life.

customers, attracting investors and building their brand, everything their company supports and invests in matters. Stakeholders — customers, employees, investors, suppliers — are paying attention to whether a company's words and actions are aligned. And that's where sports sponsorship comes in.

## More than Sponsorship — a Values Statement

Most companies have a set of corporate values that define their culture and shape their brand. While every company says, "we value diversity and inclusion," far fewer companies have managed to translate their values into competitive advantage. Those that have are able to internalize and reflect their values in everything they do, including their sponsorship dollars.

Today, more leading companies are looking at all their actions — and spending — for alignment with their values and business imperatives. For companies committed to diversity and inclusion, sponsoring women's pro sports is a positive, visible extension of their commitment to opportunities for women and girls.

## Sports as an Incubator for Leadership

Every company wants to hire and develop employees with leadership potential. Sports have always been incubators of character and leadership. Female athletes can be effective role models for girls and boys; women and men.

Notre Dame Basketball Coach Muffet McGraw said it well: "We don't have enough female role models. We don't have enough visible women leaders. We don't have enough women in power. Where better than in sports... for girls to... watch for how women lead."

## Creating Lasting 'Impressions'

Under the leadership of Commissioner Mike Whan, the LPGA has built its brand around the accessibility of our global athletes and creatively supporting our sponsors' objectives. Before every LPGA event, our players receive a "partner profile" with information about the title sponsor, sample social media messages and even the names of individuals to recognize with written thank-you notes. Through these efforts, our sponsors recognize that traditional metrics and media impressions are just the gateway for a more valuable outcome: creating relationships and inspiring brand loyalty.

## A Leadership Opportunity

The business case for investing in women's professional sports is based on strategy, not charity. It's built on the fundamentals of excellent competition, engaging athletes, strong entertainment and brand value. It's about aligning sports sponsorships with business imperatives. It's about making a visible commitment to diversity and inclusion. It's about the value of role models and investing in future leaders. And, it's about creating lasting impressions.

If you believe that women's professional sports are at a turning point, the question comes down to... will you lead? Or will you follow?

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The LPGA Tour boasts many young global stars like Ariya Jutanugarn (above), who connects here with one of her young fans.

occurred when the best female golfers teed it up at the 2016 Olympics — the first time golf was played in the Olympics in 112 years.

Beyond sheer sporting excellence, there's another important reason why women's sports are attracting more sponsors. Increasingly, we are finding our sponsors are reframing and expanding the business case for women's sports. They see it as a way to differentiate their brands and amplify their core values of diversity, inclusion and leadership.

While sports sponsorship decisions have typically been made primarily in marketing or community relations, we are finding new allies in the C-suite: the executives in charge of human resources, sustainability, and diversity & inclusion. These leaders understand that when it comes to competing for talent, winning

<sup>1</sup> Womeninsports.org

<sup>2</sup> Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sports

<sup>3</sup> Nielsen Sports: The Rise of Women's Sports