BREAKING BARRIERS: TRAILBLAZING WOMEN IN SPORTS MEDIA

by

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ABSTRACT

Women in sports media are continuing to make strides, years after the first women entered the industry. Two trailblazers in the female sports media world are Lesley Visser and Melissa Ludtke. The two of them are considered the leaders for women in sports media.

In everyday life, women have received equality in many aspects, in part due to acts like Title IX. However, there are still reflections of inequality and discrimination of females in sports media today, whether it be the female athletes or the female reporters.

In this research, the moments discussed in each sports journalist’s section will touch upon breaking barriers and the implications these women faced being a trailblazing female in this industry. These women have faced bias, underrepresentation and, at times, a hostile culture.

Based on research and personal one-on-one interviews, I approach Visser and Ludtke in an exploration of their history, where women in sports media stand today and where women could be headed. Women have persevered in this male-dominated industry, but there are some who still feel that they don’t belong in this men’s club.
Breaking Barriers: Trailblazers in Sports Media

Lesley Visser

In 1974, sports media was a men's club until Lesley Visser came along. She was the first woman to work for Sports Illustrated as a beat reporter. Visser joined the sports staff of the Boston Globe in 1979, and in 1987, she became the first female college football writer. From there, she went on to become the first woman hired to work on a network broadcast of the Super Bowl and the first to call a World Series game in ESPN's history. In January 2016, Mendoza formally joined the all-female booth to call any male sports team, not just football, with Amazon Prime Thursday Night Football.

Melissa Ludtke

When the New Yankees barred her from their clubhouse, Lesley Visser knew that she was working in a patriarchal environment. But Ludtke knew that she was in a position to use her platform to speak the truth and stand up for women in sports. She was a beat reporter for Sports Illustrated and eventually became a staff writer for the magazine. Ludtke and Visser are known as the “First Ladies” of women in sports media, and their contributions have helped pave the way for future generations of female sportswriters. Ludtke said she felt like she was the one being put on trial in the case of Kuhn v. Ludtke, but in the end, Judge Constance Baker Motley's ruling in favor of Ludtke was about the equal access to sources. Ludtke said she was not just fighting for herself, but for all sports journalists who follow Visser and Ludtke.

The Next Generation

While the road to equality for women in sports media is still long, Visser and Ludtke see signs for hope in the future. They believe that the change is due in part to two women who are called trailblazers in sports media today. In 2014, Jessica Mendoza joined the all-female broadcast on ESPN to call any male sports team. Mendoza is the worst example of a woman working in sports media, and today's journalists follow these two women and many others.

Women in media, and sports media in particular, still face challenges. Women often have worked to be taken seriously in their field and to be recognized for their accomplishments and storylines. They face public criticism on social media. In some cases, they end up on television, and then there are other women who want to be on television and end up in less desirable roles. The basic question about a woman being a men's locker room is rhetorical about a woman being a men's locker room. Ludtke said, was about the equal access to sources.

Today, she is the only sportscaster who has worked network broadcasts of seven major sporting events: Super Bowl, NBA Finals, Triple Crown, Olympic Games, U.S. Open, World Series, and the World Cup. She continues to work for CBS Sports and is a bestselling author. Visser has been inducted into the Sportswriters Hall of Fame and the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Visser and Ludtke continue to face a patriarchal environment and criticism for their work. They are not alone in their struggle, and there is strength in numbers. The All Women's Sports Media (AWSM) is an alliance of women in sports media. AWSM was founded in 2018 by Visser and Ludtke. The group aims to support and empower women in sports media. They hope to create a platform where women in sports media can share their stories and experiences.

Visser and Ludtke believe that the road to equality is long, but they are not alone. The women who have come before them paved the way, and the women who are following in their footsteps continue to push for change. They encourage future generations of women in sports media to continue the fight for equality, and to remember the history that needs to be shared as they also reflect on what's to come.

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