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# **Smiling assassins, brides-to-be and super mums: The importance of gender and celebrity in media framing of female athletes at the 2016 Olympic Games**

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## **Abstract**

The Olympic Games offer a rare opportunity for women in sport to receive broad media interest, with recognisable and familiar athletes receiving higher levels of attention by journalists during this media-event. This article reports on a case study of representations of three female athletes within the British print press during the 2016 Olympic Games. Nicola Adams (boxing), Charlotte Dujardin (dressage) and Jessica Ennis-Hill (heptathlon) were all gold medallists in 2012, so already had some celebrity in Britain prior to 2016, which journalists built on during the Games. Representations of these athletes were found to be highly ambivalent, praising their athletic achievements whilst simultaneously undermining their prowess through questioning the sport, level of competition, and individual athletic performances. Analysis illustrates the importance of celebrity and visibility to female athletes in receiving mainstream media attention, but such interest remains ambiguous and understated.

**Key words:** celebrity; gender; media; Olympics; representation



## Introduction

The representation of female sports and athletes by the media has long been a focus of academic interest, and found to contribute to the devaluation of women's athleticism through underreporting on women's sport, trivialising, marginalising and infantilising female athletes, and positioning women's sporting practices and achievements within narrow heteronormative frameworks (Fink, 2015; Trolan, 2013). Research conducted in the US by Cheryl Cooky, Michael Messner and colleagues has shown that, over the last 25 years, coverage of women's sport as a percentage of overall sports coverage on network television has actually decreased (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013; Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015), and Biscomb and Matheson (2017) found a similar pattern in relation to British print media. 'New media' sources, such as blogs and websites, also underreport women's sport (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Burch, Eagleman & Pedersen, 2012; Lisec & McDonald, 2012). The lack of visibility given to female sports and athletes across a range of media platforms, combined with different production techniques, and ambiguous and even, at times, sexist reporting, is set against a background of rising female sporting participation and achievement (BBC, 2015). Despite increased female involvement in sport at all levels, media ambivalence – often indifference – helps frame women's sports as less exciting, interesting and worthy than men's sports.

Every four years the summer Olympic Games give a boost to media coverage of women's sport (the winter Games play a similar role in countries which perform well in winter sports). For two weeks, (some) female sports and athletes receive levels of coverage unimaginable outside of the Games period as national media get behind 'their' athletes – male and female – cheering them on and sharing stories of success, heartache, heroism and sacrifice, as the nation unites (temporarily) under a haze of sporting nationalism (Vincent et al., 2017). Delorme (2014) suggests that, quantitatively, female athletes receive proportionately more media attention during the Games than do male athletes, although he concedes that the content of that coverage can be ambiguous and problematic. The 2012 summer Olympics were heralded as 'the women's Games', as a number of important milestones related to female participation were achieved. Despite this, many studies showed that, overall, female sports and athletes received less media coverage than did their male counterparts during the 2012 Games, and coverage of women's performances across TV, print and online platforms was characterised by ambivalence (Godoy-Pressland & Griggs, 2014; Eagleman, 2015). Some female athletes received significant media attention during the 2012 Games, but this was usually confined to those who had the most heterosexual sex appeal for men (Kian, Bernstein & Maguire, 2013). Media interest in women's sport soon waned after the 'glow' of the 2012 Games dissipated and within weeks coverage was back to pre-Games low levels (O'Neill & Mulready, 2015).



The 2016 Rio Olympics were plagued with controversy in the lead-up, related to funding, social unrest and the threat posed by the Zika virus, but the Games themselves passed without major incident and were generally considered 'successful' by athletes and officials, despite low spectator attendance at many events. The Games were certainly successful for Britain's female athletes, with women winning 48% of all medals won by Team GB in Rio (Martinson, 2016). As the Olympics represent one of the very few occasions when female sports and athletes receive significant media interest, they provide an important context for questioning the ways in which women's athleticism and achievements are represented and reported within mainstream media, which continue to perform an important role in shaping and influencing public opinion and debate (McCombs, 2013). Analysis of Australian prime time coverage of the 2016 Games indicates that although male and female athletes received nearly equal clock time, the content of coverage differed substantially, illustrating that sports media coverage of the Olympics remains strongly gendered (Xu et al., 2017).

Sport has become increasingly mediatised, with the importance of celebrity becoming more prominent for the commercial success of individual athletic careers (Andrews & Jackson, 2002; Rowe, 2009). As the biggest media sports event for female athletes, the Olympics represent an important opportunity for exposure and visibility. The traditional media, print and television, compete for audiences within an increasingly competitive and fragmented marketplace, and so news values of entertainment, novelty and local relevance may be particularly important for getting (and keeping) audiences during the important media-event of the Olympic Games. Consequently those athletes who achieve the most media attention are likely to be not only successful in sporting terms, but to also provide some additional news value for journalists seeking an exciting story. Some female athletes gained high visibility within British media coverage during the 2016 Olympics, as a result of their athletic successes, media-friendly persona, and/or in association with a story emerging in relation to them deemed 'newsworthy' by the British press. In this paper I draw on the examples of three British female athletes: Nicola Adams (boxing), Charlotte Dujardin (dressage) and Jessica Ennis-Hill (heptathlon/athletics). Analysis of the ways in which these three very successful athletes were represented in the British print press during the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio is revealing of the importance of both gender and celebrity to media framing of female athleticism and sporting prowess.

The paper begins with a short discussion of the growing body of research that questions the ways that female sports and athletes are represented across media platforms. I go on to consider briefly the importance of celebrity to athletes and the ways this may influence media interest in female sports. After discussing the methods used within this study I present the dominant discourses used to frame each of these successful female British athletes during the 2016 Olympic Games in order to



consider the ways in which female sporting achievement is framed within media discourse. I discuss how representations of these sportswomen illustrate the gendering of sporting celebrity, and consider the extent to which coverage of them can be regarded as 'progress' in relation to more widespread and positive portrayals of women in sport.

### **Media framing of female sports and athletes**

Numerous studies have now shown the quantitative disparity between media coverage of men's and women's sports: men's sports receive substantially more coverage across different media platforms (Cooky et al., 2013; Kane, 2013). This coverage is limited further by the dominance of just a few men's sports. In the US, Cooky et al. (2015) describe how the 'big three' of men's football, basketball and baseball dominate televised sports news, receiving nearly 75% of all coverage in their most recent study. In the UK, football (soccer) holds undisputed pre-eminence, with O'Neill and Mulready (2015) reporting that 70% of all coverage in the British press during the period they analysed focused solely on the sport, leading them to describe the sports pages of major UK newspapers as "a football saturated boyzone" (p.652). The narrow focus of mainstream media sports reporting helps construct a hierarchy of sports for audiences, with a very limited group of men's sports receiving the substantial majority of media attention. This helps create and sustain interest in these sports, to the detriment of women's sports (and most men's sports) which do not enjoy the same levels of media interest.

When presented with the lack of coverage of women's sports, many journalists and editors argue that they are simply responding to audience interests and that there is little appetite for more coverage of women's sports (O'Neill & Mulready, 2015). However, as several researchers have pointed out, this disguises the important role media play in not just presenting sport but also re-presenting sport for audiences, influencing how different sports, athletes and events will be interpreted and received, and consequently helping produce and sustain audiences for some sports and not others (Hardin, 2005). Therefore it is not just the quantity of media coverage of women's sports and athletes (or lack thereof) which is important for how female athleticism is perceived but also the quality and content of that coverage. The concept of framing, drawing on Goffman (1974), has provided a useful conceptual tool for many researchers in examining the meanings created by the language and packaging of female sports and the impacts this may have on media audiences (Angelini, Billings & MacArthur, 2013; Eagleman, 2015). Boykoff and Yasuoka (2015) explain that



“[t]hrough agenda setting, the mass media tell us what to think about and through framing they suggest how we should think about it.” In relation to women’s sports, media set an agenda that women’s sport is not as important as men’s sports (and particularly the dominant men’s sports) through stark disparities in coverage, and frame women’s sports as less interesting and exciting through a variety of practices:

- Gender marking – by consistently using the prefix ‘women’s’ before female competitions, women’s sport is marked out as different to the norm of the unmarked (men’s) competitions (Brooks, 2002; Hallmark, 2006).
- Infantilising – female athletes are often described as ‘girls’ or ‘young ladies’, or referred to by their first name alone more than are male athletes (Fuller, 2006; Fink, 2015). This can help frame female athletes as childlike, and thus less serious.
- Different production techniques – audiences consume sport as a mediated experience the majority of the time, and so the ways in which specific events are produced can have a significant effect on how fast and exciting they appear. Media representations of men’s sports tend to include more varied camera angles, more specialist discussion, more graphics and more animated commentary than do those of women’s sports events, helping create more buzz and passion around men’s events (Hardin, 2005; Greer, Hardin & Homan, 2009; Cooky et al., 2015).
- Ambivalence – analysis of the language used to describe female athletic performances shows reporting is often lacklustre, downplaying technical skill and foregrounding factors such as hard work, luck and the role of others in a woman’s successes (Black & Fielding-Lloyd, 2017; Cooky et al., 2015; Eagleman, 2015; Fink, 2015). Therefore although female athletes may often be represented in broadly positive terms, the ambiguity of these representations detracts from any favourable impressions.
- Sexualisation – female athletes have frequently been sexualised in sports media, with those deemed most heterosexually attractive to men receiving the most media attention, regardless of their sporting achievements (Rowe, 2004). There is evidence that overt sexualisation is reducing, but Cooky et al. (2015) caution that this appears to be at the expense of overall coverage: there may be less overt sexualisation than in previous times but there is also less media coverage of female sports and athletes.
- Heteronormativity – female sports and athletes are presented within narrow heteronormative frameworks. Sports and athletes that fit most closely with normative ideals of femininity receive most media attention, so even during a mixed-sex event like the Olympics a feminine appropriate sport like gymnastics receives far more media attention



than do team sports which may conform less easily to idealised notions of femininity (Sailors, Teetzel & Weaving, 2012; Eagleman, 2015). Female athlete's heterosexual credentials are also frequently referred to in media reporting, and consequently their roles as wives, girlfriends and mothers may be foregrounded. This leaves little space for sports and athletes that do not fit with heteronormative ideals, and consequently lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, as well as those whose physical appearance is less 'heterosexy', are marginalised within media representations (Krane, 2001; Stevenson, 2004).

The combined effects of these frameworks, coupled with the low proportion of media space devoted to women's sports across all platforms, constructs female athleticism as 'different' to and less exciting and credible than men's, which remain dominant in media sport.

### **Celebrity and female athletes**

Female sports and athletes are thus at a disadvantage in relation to media exposure and the status and commercial success that comes with it and which is often important to sustaining a viable career as a professional athlete. Despite few opportunities for media exposure, as well as ambivalent representations which serve to undermine their athleticism and sporting prowess, some female athletes are able to capitalise on contemporary fascination with 'celebrity', which permeates aspects of the sports world. Celebrity fuels the production of subcultures and helps set expectations in day to day life, and so plays an important role in framing discourse around gender (Turner, 2010).

Within sport, celebrity plays an increasingly important role in constructing subworlds, establishing norms and making fans feel closer to star performers (Gilmour & Rowe, 2010; Jackson & Andrews, 2012). Athletes with higher celebrity value can capitalise on this for commercial purposes, as their active engagement with fans and high visibility can increase their commodity value and, in turn, drive brand awareness and marketing (Pegoraro, 2010). Social media plays an important role in the modern cult of celebrity and enables athletes to engage directly with fans, helping to create a sense of community and establish norms and accepted values (Dashper, 2017). Given the paucity of media coverage of female athletes, and the commercial imperatives driving journalists and editors in the traditional media to increase sales and keep and attract audiences, it is perhaps not surprising that those female athletes with higher celebrity value are deemed more newsworthy and interesting than those who are less known and visible to audiences. Consequently, those female athletes who



are recognisable and familiar to audiences receive far greater media attention during the Olympic Games than those within niche sports and with low celebrity value.

Celebrity value within women's sports may or may not be linked to sporting success and ability, and it is notable that some of the highest profile female athletes have been mediocre in competition (Harris & Clayton, 2002; Vincent, 2004). Celebrity athletes tend to fit easily within the dominant frames used by journalists to represent women's sports as discussed above, and thus those with 'heterosexy' appeal or a 'girl-next-door' persona may receive more media attention than the highly successful athlete who does not fit easily within dominant frameworks used for representing women in sport and in wider society (Christopherson et al., 2002; Smith, 2012). During the Olympic Games when the media turns unprecedented levels of interest towards female athletes, those with celebrity value, who can be presented easily within dominant discourses of acceptable sporting femininity, may be the competitors to receive most widespread attention.

Celebrity status in relation to women generally, and female athletes in particular, is complex. Edwards (2013) argues that too little attention has been paid to the ways in which celebrity is gendered, and this gendering occurs on at least three levels. First, the production of celebrity is gendered, as men and women play different roles in relation to the media's hand in the promotion of fame. In sport, the dominance of men in most positions in journalism – from reporters, to editors, presenters and producers – illustrates how gender is integral to the production of sporting celebrity, which, through the British print media, the focus of this study, is dominated by men. Second, celebrity is gendered in relation to consumption (Edwards, 2013). Men and women consume celebrity differently and through different mechanisms. Women tend to consume celebrity through magazines and lifestyle programmes, whereas men do so through masculine practices and institutions, such as sport. Consequently, in relation to this study, the most likely consumers of sporting celebrity through the British print press are men; male journalists are writing for a male-dominated audience, and this will affect the types of stories covered, and the nature of that coverage. Third, the content of celebrity is gendered, with men and women becoming famous in different ways, or for different reasons (Edwards, 2013). Men are more likely to become famous for what they do – such as sporting success – whereas women are championed more for how they look. Applying Edwards's (2013) framework to sporting celebrity as represented through the British print media suggests that gender will be an important aspect of such celebrity, on all three levels.

The troubling and complex aspects of female sporting celebrity are illustrated in Cohen's (2013) discussion of Beth Tweddle, Britain's most successful gymnast. Cohen considers the relative absence of celebrity in relation to Tweddle, and discusses why some sportspeople receive little social



recognition. As a highly consistent and successful athlete in a feminine-appropriate sport, Tweddle appears to be the epitome of media-friendly female athleticism, yet she received minimal coverage over the course of her career, especially in relation to other less successful female athletes, and had few high profile sponsorship or media roles. Cohen (2013) suggests that Tweddle's non-celebrity was due to her physical strength and technical abilities, and her misalignment with normative ideals of femininity in and beyond gymnastics. Consequently Tweddle did not embody the type of corporeal femininity valued in women who achieve celebrity (Edwards, 2013). Further, although Tweddle had popular support, as evidenced through her Twitter following and coming third in the Sports Personality of the Year award, she received little media support. Her status was thus limited by the gendering of celebrity in relation to both production and consumption (Edwards, 2013). Tweddle's fan base is strongest with little girls, who are marginalised and virtually invisible in sports media terms, as they have little economic or sporting capital, and consequently she received little media interest and support (Cohen, 2013). The case of Tweddle thus illustrates many of the complexities and contradictions inherent in female sporting celebrity, where success is not enough to guarantee exposure and popularity.

The dynamics between the marginalisation of women's sport in the mainstream media and the importance of celebrity to contemporary understandings and media consumption, combine to frame the discourses used to represent women athletes during the Olympic Games, as illustrated below in relation to three highly successful British female athletes. Analysis of representations of each of these athletes reveals the gendered nature of sporting celebrity and the continued marginalisation of women in relation to content (as athletes), production and consumption of sports media.

## **Methods**

The print media remain a powerful force in British society, still strongly influencing popular opinion and debate despite falling circulation figures and the proliferation of alternative sources of news. This influence was powerfully illustrated in 2016, as newspaper attitudes to 'Brexit' played an important role in shaping debate and consensus in relation to this controversial topic. Unlike television, the British press is self-regulating and so relatively free to print whatever views and opinions they like, as long as their advertisers do not object (Vincent, 2003). Driven by news values of excitement, novelty, relevance and controversy, journalists and editors of newspapers are not constrained by requirements for impartiality or fairness, and rather frame reports and coverage in ways they think their audiences will relate to and enjoy (even though Hardin's (2005) work suggests editors often do little research to understand audience profiles and views). Consequently, analysis of



newspaper coverage of women's sport in Britain is particularly interesting as it may both reflect and help construct attitudes towards female athletes (and women more broadly).

To consider the discourses used to frame female athletic performance during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, and the importance of celebrity to those representations, I selected three highly successful British female athletes who participate in very different sports to act as case studies: Nicola Adams (boxing), Charlotte Dujardin (dressage) and Jessica Ennis-Hill (heptathlon). All three won gold in their respective events in 2012, and were expected to repeat this in 2016. All are well established in their sports, being now in their early 30s, and all have active social media profiles through which they engage with fans and build a level of celebrity within their sporting field. Each represents a very different sport, however, with varying levels of visibility and status within the broader sports world and consequently within the sports media. The selection of these three women enabled consideration of the ways in which the nature of the sport in which they compete may affect media responses to them and their successes, and representations of them as outstanding athletes.

There is wide variation between the type and tone of sports coverage offered within different British newspapers, with the 'red top' tabloids differing significantly from the more serious broadsheets. To gain insight into how female athletes are represented across different newspapers in Britain, the top ten newspapers in circulation figures (including online users) were selected for analysis through the newspaper search tool LexisNexis (Newsworks, 2016; Ponsford, 2016). Nine publications could be accessed (*The Metro* did not have records). A search was performed within these publications for the dates 29 July – 28 August 2016, to cover the two week period of the Games and one week before and after the event, using the athletes' names as search criteria. All returned results were analysed for each athlete, using the frames commonly deployed in relation to representations of female athletes, outlined above. An additional theme - the importance of celebrity – was added to the analysis.

## **Findings**

The three selected female athletes all received considerable media coverage in the British press during the study period, as illustrated in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE



These quantitative results show that the press did cover these women during the Games period, driven in part by their excellent performances (two gold and two silver medals between them). It is clear from this crude numerical search that Ennis-Hill received by far the greatest media attention in this period, but quantitative results can offer little insight into the reasons for this (she was the only one of the three selected athletes not to win a gold medal) or to the discourses used by print journalists to frame these women and their athletic performances. In order to explore these issues further the following sections consider the various discourses and frameworks employed in relation to each athlete and the ways this represents each woman and her performance at the 2016 Olympic Games.

### ***Nicola Adams: The babyface assassin***

Nicola Adams, 33, is a flyweight boxer, holding Olympic, European and Commonwealth golds. In some respects Adams is the athlete in this study who conforms least to the dominant frameworks used by the media to represent female athletes and so might be expected to receive the most ambivalent, perhaps even negative, coverage by journalists. As a black, working class, openly bisexual woman boxer she does not fit within heteronormative ideals of acceptable sporting femininity. Women's boxing did not appear on the Olympic programme until 2012, and prior to that caused controversy in relation to its suitability for women and associated discomfort about fighting, femininity and how female boxers should dress for competition (Lindner, 2012; van Ingen & Kovacs, 2012). However, Woodward (2013, p. 242) argues that women's boxing "became legitimate" at London 2012, and early disquiet about whether or not women should be punching each other for sport slipped out of popular discourse. Adams won gold in the flyweight division in 2012, catapulting her to relative fame in British sport, and her media profile was high due to both her historic achievement and her 'bubbly' media-friendly personality (Finkel, 2015).

Consequently, going into the 2016 Olympics, Adams was already a familiar athlete to the British press and audiences. Dubbed 'the babyface assassin' by media in 2012, due to her ever-present broad smile which is seemingly at odds with her sporting prowess, she already had a measure of celebrity which made her an attractive female athlete for the press to focus on in Olympic coverage. Representations of her thus illustrate aspects of Bruce's (2016) argument about the expanding frames of reference for female athleticism, as Adams is presented as both powerful *and* appealing. Adams is an outstanding boxer, and made history in 2016 when she became the first British boxer to retain an Olympic title for 92 years. This was widely covered by the press, and her performance was



represented as convincing, powerful and significant for sport, as this extract from the *Daily Mirror* illustrates:

Boxer Nicola Adams made history with another glorious gold last night. The Yorkshire-born world champion produced a stunning display to see off France's Sarah Ourahmoune and retain the flyweight title. Nicola, 33, won 3-0 on the judges' score cards with a convincing display of power and precision boxing. She is the first British boxer to win successive golds since 1924 and also the only woman to achieve the feat. As the result was announced, she stood on the ropes smiling with her fists raised in the air. (Armstrong, 2016).

Adams' historic sporting success was celebrated across the newspapers studied. Frequently her achievement was not gender-marked; her historic back-to-back victories make her more successful than any other British boxer - male or female - since 1924. She is described as 'powerful', 'supremely accomplished' and 'an icon', and as fighting with 'intelligence, patience and style'. Her performance is described in strong, sporting language such as "a succession of pummelling headshots" (Kidd, 2016) and "Adams hit back with a heavy right-hand blow" (Powell, 2016). There is unambiguous reverence for her skill and abilities in many reports, as these comments from *The Independent* illustrate:

[h]er extreme composure against Cancan was quite extraordinary at this high level. She made a hard task look simple, a very good fighter look ordinary and only the very best can do that. (Bunce, 2016).

In such ways Adams is represented in positive, powerful and sporting terms that emphasise her abilities and achievements. Unlike other successful black female athletes, such as the Williams sisters in tennis, Adams is not represented as threatening, or subversive, and there are few racial undertones to articles. This may in part be due to Adams' position within boxing – a sport traditionally associated with black men, and framed within racial discourse – as opposed to the Williams' sisters potentially more transgressive roles within the white sport of tennis (Spencer, 2001; Douglas, 2005). Representations of the friendly, approachable Adams show parallels to those of Mo Farah, whose Muslim identity and migrant background are rendered safe and palatable to audiences by virtue of his considerable athletic success and unpolitical persona (Burdsey, 2016).

Yet despite the positive framing of Adams' historic achievements in a non-feminine appropriate sport, representations of her are still underpinned by some ambivalence. There is widespread focus on her smiley persona (from which her nickname is derived), with frequent reference to 'her cheery



enthusiasm', 'sunny disposition' and 'megawatt smile'. There are few references to her personal relationships (she is openly bisexual), but frequent mentions of her mum and her dog, placing her within familiar family networks. This helps construct Adams as a friendly and accessible individual, despite her participation in a violent sport, and this no doubt helps build her profile and celebrity status, important for her commercial viability as an athlete. At the same time, such framing also detracts somewhat from her powerful performances and helps render her 'safe' for media consumption as although she transgresses norms through her physical power and performance, she is still understood as friendly and accessible in her disposition and personality (see also Burdsey, 2016).

There is further ambivalence in relation to Adams which serves to detract from the praise expressed for her historic sporting achievements at the 2016 Games. In the early stages of the competition, Adams received a first-round bye which led to some questioning of the level of competition within women's boxing, and thus the value of Adams' dominance within her division, as this example from the *Daily Mail* illustrates:

Nice work if you can get it, Nicola. A medal is a medal, but the fact that Nicola Adams has to win a single bout in Rio de Janeiro to earn one — she has a bye in the first round, and victory in the second will put her in the semi-finals, with both losers getting a bronze — can only devalue the competition. To have true worth, Olympic sport must represent a genuine test. One good punch should not be enough. (Samuel, 2016).

Adams is thus represented in ambivalent ways. Her undeniable prowess in the boxing ring is celebrated, as is her historic achievement in Rio, and this frames her, and women's boxing, as legitimate in sporting terms, and suggests that women can be seen as powerful, successful and appealing. The slight question mark raised about the worthiness of her opponents undermines this somewhat, and emphasis on her unthreatening persona may further distract from her athletic accomplishments. However, given that women's boxing has been perceived as an 'unfeminine' sport which is inappropriate for women until very recently, and Adams herself does not conform to heteronormative ideals of femininity through her appearance and sexual orientation, she was represented in broadly positive ways by the British press during the 2016 Games. This supports Bruce's (2016) argument about shifts in ideas of acceptable sporting femininity, underpinned in this case by the celebrity status and media friendly persona of Adams as an individual.



### ***Charlotte Dujardin: Dancing horses and needy fiancés***

Charlotte Dujardin, 31, is Olympic, World and European champion in the equestrian sport of dressage, and world record holder. She is the most successful British dressage rider of all time, and with her champion horse Valegro has taken the equestrian world by storm, building a strong international fan base and helping bring dressage to a wider audience (Dashper, 2017). In 2012 she won individual and team gold, marking the first time a British rider had ever won an Olympic medal in dressage since the sport first appeared on the Olympic programme in 1912. In 2016 she retained the individual title, secured team silver, and set a new Olympic record. Dressage is a niche sport that has received very little attention in the mainstream British press. Dujardin's success in 2012 resulted in considerable coverage, but this was highly ambivalent and frequently trivialised and even mocked dressage as a sport (Fletcher & Dashper, 2013). Dujardin's remarkable achievements at the Rio Games are set against media ambivalence to the sport of dressage which is (mis)understood as elitist and unfathomable by a male-dominated sports media that usually concentrates on a small subsection of sports.

Dujardin's individual gold was a standout performance within her sport, and the British press did acknowledge this. Hellborg and Hedenborg (2015) found that the press in Sweden - a country in which equestrian sport is popular, particularly with women – represented equestrian athletes in complex and ambiguous ways during the 2012 Games. This was repeated within the British press in 2016, as illustrated in the following excerpt from *The Times*:

Say what you like about dressage – that it's a niche event, that it's confusing, that it's basically just dancing horses. But the bottom line is this: Charlotte Dujardin went to Rio, made her stallion Valegro perform the samba and, in doing so, blew the competition away, sending the Brazilian crowd wild and becoming the most successful British dressage rider of all time by adding a third gold medal to her 2012 pair. (Machell, 2016).

In such ways Dujardin is represented as an incredible athlete, described variously as 'a genius', 'outstanding' and 'amazing'. Yet at the same time the ambivalence towards the sport of dressage shown by journalists serves to undermine Dujardin's performance. Unlike 'real' sports, dressage is presented as artistic and beautiful, but not that sporty, so therefore Dujardin's gold is of lesser value than that of athletes in more well-known sports, such as athletics.

Dujardin's success in 2012 had brought her to prominence, and the British press had become aware of 'the dancing horses' of dressage, probably for the first time (Fletcher & Dashper, 2013). Consequently, both dressage and Dujardin (and her horse, Valegro) already had a measure of



Olympic celebrity which the press were able to build on and this, combined with Dujardin's undeniable success and dominance of her sport, led to increased media coverage in 2016. As in 2012, the lack of knowledge of dressage by sports journalists was evident in the not infrequent factual errors in stories about Dujardin and Valegro, and in the slightly mocking tone of some stories. One tongue-in-cheek offering in *The Sun* illustrates this ambiguity between appreciation of Dujardin's achievements, and mocking of the sport. In 'A week in the life of Valegro', Brommage (2016) writes as Dujardin's horse. The article raises the notion that, in dressage, the rider does very little and it is the horse alone that performs, as 'Valegro' comments

Two days to go until I attempt to carry Charlotte Dujardin to another gold medal ... I'm not bitter but where's my medal, eh? She just sits while I'm moonwalking and Gangnam Stylin'! I get stick from other horses for doing dressage. They reckon I'm a big ponce. I think the least I deserve is some bling for making such an idiot of myself.

This article is clearly meant to be amusing, and the fact that Dujardin and the niche sport of dressage are considered newsworthy enough to form the basis of an article in the usually football-dominated *Sun* is a result of the visibility she gained in 2012, followed up by her continuing success, and represents an unusual moment for the sport of dressage getting coverage in the tabloid press. However, the frequent allusions to Dujardin's lack of involvement in their gold-medal winning performance, and suggestions that dressage is ridiculous anyway, detract from her considerable achievements.

In 2016 one further newsworthy event was attached to Dujardin which had nothing to do with her sporting success but garnered widespread media attention. Dujardin's fiancé held up a sign in the crowd during her gold-medal winning performance, reading, 'Can we get married now?' Dujardin was not the only Olympian to have her winning moment eclipsed by a partner, as four other proposals occurred during the Games. Vine (2016), writing in the *Daily Mail*, did critique Dujardin's fiancé for 'stealing the limelight', arguing that "he ought not to have detracted from her hard-won victory by doing the emotional equivalent of naked star jumps". Several journalists suggested that Dujardin's fiancé's actions were perhaps mistimed and served to detract from her Olympic achievements, but most represented the proposal as romantic and her fiancé as 'long-suffering'. Dujardin is thus presented in a familiar heteronormative framework wherein marriage should be the ultimate desire and goal for women, even those who have just won an Olympic gold medal. Dujardin's apparent rejection of this, as she has not yet wed her waiting fiancé, positions her outside normative frameworks employed by the media. Her fiancé is placed in the role of the 'hard-done-by'



romantic, patiently waiting for his partner who obstinately continues to prioritise her sporting career over marriage.

Representations of Dujardin are thus highly ambivalent and complex. Her undeniable success and dominance of her sport brings praise and attention, and her prior visibility within the media following her 2012 triumph helped journalists frame stories around her and her 'dancing horse'. However, the frequently-repeated suggestions that dressage may not be a 'real' sport detract from celebrations of her achievements, even if such references are framed in light-hearted ways. Attention given to the actions of Dujardin's fiancé and his proposal further diminish focus on her athletic prowess and Olympic glory, as considerable space was devoted to this story, framing her within heteronormative discourse, at the expense of discussion of her gold-medal winning performance.

### ***Jessica Ennis-Hill: The super-mum***

Jessica Ennis-Hill, 30, is world champion and former Olympic and European champion in heptathlon. She won gold in the challenging event in 2012, and became the poster girl for Team GB and the Olympics in her home country, receiving widespread media attention and lucrative sponsorship deals for high profile international brands such as Adidas and Omega. Consequently, Ennis-Hill's celebrity status is high and she is very well known and recognised by the British press and audiences. In 2014 she had a child and returned to the top of her sport quickly, becoming world champion in 2015. Therefore, going into the 2016 Games she was widely expected to retain her Olympic title and received considerable media attention in the run up to the event.

Ennis-Hill went on to win silver in Rio, narrowly missing out on gold, a remarkable feat in a challenging multi-discipline event. Given high expectations for 'the darling' of British athletics, media responses to her silver medal were somewhat subdued. As has been noted in relation to other female Olympians who win silver, Ennis-Hill was represented as 'losing her heptathlete's crown', and having to 'settle' for silver (see Helborg & Hedenborg, 2015). There was clearly some disappointment in relation to Ennis-Hill's silver-medal performance, and this was expressed through ambivalent language which questioned her age and her ability to continue in her sport, as this example from the letters page of *The Evening Standard* (2016) illustrates:

To see one of the stars of London 2012, Jessica Ennis-Hill, struggling in Rio was rather sad. Only her effort in the high jump was convincing and she scored 220 fewer points than her London Olympics total. This makes me wonder whether, at the age of 30, she



may be better off considering retiring and becoming an ambassador for UK athletics. She has always shown good grace, style, and ability while competing, as well as having an infectious smile and a deep sense of fair play.

This and other representations of Ennis-Hill do not sound like they are reporting on an Olympic silver medallist, and her 'failure' to win gold resulted in frequent questioning of her abilities and the issue of retirement was raised in most stories on her performance. Consequently, despite winning silver, Ennis-Hill was still represented as disappointing and not quite as good an athlete as the press and sporting public hoped for. Her redeeming feature within such frameworks is her 'grace' and her smiling persona, which help maintain her celebrity status and visibility within media accounts. Rather than fall completely out of favour, Ennis-Hill is reframed as "poised to call time on her glittering career after having to settle for second best" (Spink, 2016). By focusing on her possible retirement (which she did not confirm during the Olympics), media accounts reposition her as a great athlete of the past, detracting from her current considerable achievement.

The dominant framework deployed in relation to Ennis-Hill was that of motherhood. Many articles refer to her roles as wife and mother, mentioning her husband and son by their first names. This constructs Ennis-Hill's family as familiar for audiences and positions her in relation to heteronormative ideals, rather than focusing predominantly on her athletic performance. She was referred to sometimes simply as 'mum-of-one', other times as 'super-mum', and many articles speculated on her emotional difficulties in leaving her son and husband behind in the UK so she could focus on her athletic performance in Rio. Numerous articles also chose to speculate on how pregnancy may have affected her body, and consequently her ability to perform at the top of her sport. In 2012 parts of her body – notably her bottom and her stomach – were picked out, sexualised and celebrated in the press and by fans on social media, and in 2016 her body once more became the focus of discussion and speculation. A sub-headline in *The Times* illustrates the ways in which Ennis-Hill's body was frequently detached from her as a person, as Dickinson (2016) wrote, "Silver medal-winner talks in a manner that suggests sport has seen the last of the famous six-pack".

Ennis-Hill's coach, Minichiello, was frequently quoted talking about her 'post-pregnancy personal bests', setting a clear differentiation between the athletic embodiment of Ennis-Hill before and after pregnancy and childbirth. An article in *The Sun* (2016) used a sports scientist who "explains the challenges Jessica Ennis-Hill faced as her body changed from being a world-class athlete to a new mother, and then got back to champion fitness." Discussions of her post-baby body, and how this may be weaker and less able to perform within such a demanding sport, delineate a clear distinction between 'elite athlete' and 'mum', and the two are not seen as compatible. Combined with the



frequent discussions of Ennis-Hill's possible imminent retirement, such framing helps reposition her as a mum first and foremost, detracting from her still considerable athletic prowess.

Ennis-Hill has the highest visibility and celebrity value of the three athletes in this study and this helped ensure she received widespread media attention during the 2016 Games, despite her 'failure' to retain her gold medal. Representations of her are highly ambivalent, bemoaning her performance and linking her firmly to her role as mother, over and above athlete.

## **Discussion**

All three athletes discussed here produced excellent results in the 2016 Games and this, building on their successes in 2012, ensured that they received attention from the British press during this period. All three were praised for their athleticism and historic achievements, be that in relation to their dominance within their sport or to overcoming challenges in returning to peak performance following childbirth. Each athlete was shown to be at the forefront of her sporting discipline, illustrating that the media can and do represent females in sport as athletic, powerful, successful and admirable, and indicating some shifts in the ways in which female athletes are represented within the mainstream media (Bruce, 2016).

However, the discourses used to present each athlete, as outlined above, show the persistence of narrow frameworks for understanding female athleticism. Representations of each athlete can best be characterised as ambivalent: although their successes are celebrated, there is always some underlying hesitancy in discussions of their achievements. This ambivalence may be related to uncertainty about the quality of competition, as in the case of Nicola Adams; or about the extent to which the discipline can be understood to be 'real' sport, as in relation to Charlotte Dujardin; or to implied questions about the suitability of elite sport for mothers, as with Jessica Ennis-Hill. The effects of such ambivalence cast a shadow on representations of each woman's athletic prowess, raising subtle doubts about her performance and achievements. Despite the three athletes discussed in this article all being at the forefront of her sport for the last four years, ambivalence in media discussions erodes positive representations of them as outstanding athletes to be admired and celebrated.

One framework that used to be commonly deployed for representing female athletes was largely absent in the articles studied here, that of sexualisation. As Cooky et al. (2015) found in US media coverage, British journalists rarely discussed any of the studied Olympians in overtly sexual ways. There was sometimes discussion of appearance, particularly smiley-ness, and occasional references



to Ennis-Hill's body in objectifying ways, but blatant sexualisation appears to be a much less frequently deployed framework than found in earlier studies (Bissel & Duke, 2007; Weber & Carini, 2012). This is to be celebrated, as media discussions of female athletes may no longer be reduced to consideration of their fleshy bodies. However, lack of overt sexualisation may not mean that female athletes' bodies are no longer important to representations of them in the media. Quayle et al. (2017) argue that stereotyping of female athletes is achieved by both omission and commission. Female athletes' bodies may not be referred to directly very often, as most male journalists now seem to be aware of the backlash they may suffer for overt sexualisation, but women's performances are still judged aesthetically, and consequently "stereotyping by omission makes women's bodies highly relevant to the spectacle, but only in unmentionable ways" (Quayle et al., 2013, p.16). This was illustrated most clearly in this study in relation to Ennis-Hill, whose 'mum-body' was the subject of constant judgement and evaluation.

The selection of three athletes from very different sports is revealing about the hierarchy of sports within British sports media. Previous studies have shown that female athletes competing in feminine-appropriate sports, such as tennis and gymnastics, garner much wider media coverage than those in sports considered masculine-appropriate (Koivula, 2001). This study suggests that such attitudes may be changing, particularly in relation to Olympic sport. Adams, a flyweight boxer, received the most positive coverage of the three athletes in this study, despite her participation in a violent sport that was not considered appropriate for women until very recently. In contrast dressage could be classified as either a feminine-appropriate sport (due to artistic and subjective elements) or gender-neutral (it is also a sport with strong military traditions and men and women compete against each other on equal terms) (Dashper, 2012). Dujardin's success in dressage could therefore be considered less troubling in gender terms than Adams' success in boxing, but media responses to Dujardin's achievements were much more ambiguous. However, lack of understanding of and familiarity with dressage may have caused journalists to fall back on easy stereotypes in their discussions of this sport which they only have to engage with once every four years, in comparison to the comfortable familiarity of boxing for most sports journalists. Therefore rather than suggesting changing attitudes to female athleticism, relatively high levels of media interest in boxer Adams may, rather, reflect (male) journalists level of familiarity and comfort with the sport. Familiarity with and understanding of the sport may thus impact the extent and nature of coverage of female athletes. This study also indicates that celebrity has an effect on media interest. All three studied athletes already had some level of visibility and recognition with the British press and audiences, following on from their successes in the 2012 home Olympic Games. This can be seen in the language used to discuss each athlete, from the friendly nickname given to Adams, to jokey considerations of



Dujardin's 'dancing horse', to the relative intimacy of discussions of Ennis-Hill's family. However, Ennis-Hill received by far the greatest level of attention in this study, despite being the only athlete of the three not to win gold in 2016, and this is a result of her far greater celebrity status. Therefore familiarity, and the visibility that comes with some measure of sporting celebrity, appear to be important to women athletes for garnering media attention.

Media representations of these women illustrate various ways in which sporting celebrity is gendered. All three levels of the gendering of celebrity, as discussed by Edwards (2013), can be seen within the articles discussed above. At the first level, the level of production, the gendering of sporting celebrity is evident. Sports journalists within British print media are overwhelmingly male, as are editors. The sports pages of British newspapers are dominated by men's sport, primarily football, and the Olympics represent an unusual moment when female athletes get considerable attention. However, male journalists, used to reporting on male sport, illustrate their discomfort with niche sports outside of their comfort zone (dressage) and their willingness to engage more with familiar masculine sports which they already understand (boxing). At the second level of Edwards' (2013) analysis, this study illustrates how sporting celebrity is gendered in relation to consumption. Although figures illustrate that roughly similar proportions of men and women buy British newspapers (Newspaper Innovation, 2013), there is a strong assumption that the sports pages are for men. Consequently male journalists and editors are writing to an imagined audience that is predominantly male, and so some female athletes are represented as celebrities, in gendered ways, to appeal to this imagined male audience. Female athletes are acceptable if they conform to dominant tropes, in this case that of being smiley, friendly and non-threatening. All three women discussed here fit that frame, and consequently they can be represented in ways palatable to a largely male audience not used to engaging with powerful female athletes. Focus on Dujardin's fiancé and his proposal, and Ennis-Hill's role as wife and mother, further position these women as acceptable to the largely male consumers of sporting celebrity on the pages of British newspapers. At the third level of Edwards' (2013) analysis, that of content, the representation of these three successful athletes illustrates how success and associated celebrity are gendered. Whilst all three were praised for their athletic abilities, they received at least as much attention for their personalities and wider roles as wives, girlfriends and mothers. Applying Edwards' (2013) framework illustrates the ways in which the athletic successes of these women are rendered palatable to sports media audiences, and their visibility and status (albeit a short-lived status, for the Olympic period), can be best understood in relation to the gendering of (sporting) celebrity.

This study has only concentrated on representations of three athletes, and only across print media in Britain during the context of the Olympic Games, and further research is needed to consider the



extent to which media framing of female athleticism may be shifting and the role of celebrity within this. However, this study does illustrate the continued ambiguity of media representations of female athletes across a range of sports. That such ambivalence remains prevalent in articles on women at the very top of their sports illustrates the continued hesitancy and uncertainty of many journalists in relation to female athleticism. Although the Olympics may offer such women unprecedented opportunity for media coverage and visibility, this attention is still uncertain and contradictory, illustrating continued discomfort and ambivalence towards women in sport. The extent to which it is possible to suggest that progress is being made in media representations of women athletes is thus questionable. Female athleticism continues to be framed as less important than men's, as it is only during major mixed sports events like the Olympic Games that women get much media attention at all. That coverage is now rarely overly sexual, but continues to be framed by narrow heteronormative ideals of acceptable sporting femininity, tied into notions of friendliness, grace and approachability. Including focus on celebrity, and the gendered aspects of this phenomenon, highlights the limited frames used to represent female athletes, and further indicates the lack of progress towards more diverse, equitable and empowering representations of female athletes in the British print press.

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Table One: Quantitative results for press coverage of Adams, Dujardin and Ennis-Hill

Paper	Adams mentions	Adams headlines	Dujardin mentions	Dujardin headlines	Ennis-Hill mentions	Ennis-Hill headlines
Total	<b>413</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>555</b>	<b>82</b>
Sun*	53	0	52	0	111	17
Mail*	27	0	14	0	29	1
Evening Standard	41	1	26	0	48	4
Mirror*	45	0	19	0	59	2
Telegraph	49	4	42	1	68	13
Daily Star*	15	1	15	0	24	0
Express*	16	0	9	1	26	1
Times	70	2	61	2	107	16
Independent	97	28	23	8	83	28

- Denotes tabloid publications