

When I started seeing sport differently - by Jali

Sport has always been a major part of my life. I have played and followed sports since I was a child, particularly soccer. For years I consumed sports media without ever questioning it. I would see an athlete on my own screen and think about the performance, skill and the dedication they put into their passions. Recently however, I have started to notice something I previously overlooked; the difference between how female athletes perform in sport and how they are represented through the media. This has changed my relationship with sports media entirely. I have realised that the media doesn't simply show me sport, instead it influences how I understand people within it, while audiences like myself also have the power to reinforce or challenge those meanings.

The moment that made me seriously question this was the famous photograph of AFLW player Tayla Harris, published in March 2019. Although I was still young I remember vividly the photograph capturing Harris kicking a football, representing athleticism, strength and skill. (Figure 1). Nothing wrong with it. Yet, the image attracted sexualised and misogynistic comments online, shifting the attention away from her sporting ability. In March 2019, ABC News reported on the controversy, with the photographer Michael Willson explaining that he wanted people to “*be blown away by the athleticism*” and that “*it doesn't matter that it's a man or a woman*” (McIver, 2019). This made me realise that a representation does not have one fixed meaning. Willson represented Harris as an athlete but some audiences decoded the image very differently.



Figure 1 - The 'controversial' photo of Harris

This affected me personally, and as a result, I began looking at sports media differently. As someone who is constantly participating in sport, I understand how much effort is hidden behind one moment of performance. When I see a female athlete in the media, I now find myself asking: am I being shown her ability, or am I being encouraged to look at her body? That question has changed what I notice when I scroll through sports content. I have become more aware of camera angles, captions and comments and how these conventions can direct audiences towards particular meanings. Research from the Australian Sports Commission shows that in a 2021 Australian media survey, 89% of sports stories included a male subject, compared with only 31% featuring a woman. It also reports that coverage of women's sport can fall below 10% outside major sports events (Australian Sports Commission, 2026). This made me realise that representation is not only about whether women appear in media, but how often they actually appear and how they are constructed when they do.

This issue became personal again on the 14th of September 2026, when I saw the media coverage surrounding Sydeny Sweeney's sports advertisement. The advertisement had reportedly been viewed more than 22 million times in its first two days, creating enormous audience engagement (The Guardian, 2026). Personally, I found the advertisement disturbing. Seeing a woman's body become such a central focus of a media campaign made me question why female athletes are still so often valued for their appearance rather than their achievements. Like the Tayla Harris incident, the misogynistic responses surrounding the advertisement left me feeling genuine disgust and disappointment. What I found most upsetting was that women can dedicate years of their lives to training, competing and pushing themselves, yet the attention surrounding women's sport can be reduced to their bodies in an instant. However, what stood out to me was that female athletes did not simply accept this representation. Athletes including Amy Hunt, Sophie Capewell and Ariarne Titmus publicly challenged the representation. After finishing the 200m at the World Athletic Ultimate Championship, Hunt directly addressed Sweeney saying: “*This is what women in sport look like. 21.4. Muscles. Hard work, blood, sweat, tears.*” (BBC Sport, 2026). Her words affected me because they completely changed the focus from appearance back to achievement. Titmus similarly questions, “*how do we live in a world where monetising a woman's body and sexualising women's sport is still a thing?*” (The Guardian, 2026).

This showed me the power of audiences. I used to think of the audience as people who simply watched or consumed the media. Now I understand audiences as active participants who can challenge, reshape and circulate representations. Hundreds of athletes responded by posting their own sporting images under the message “*this is what a woman in sport looks like*”, creating an alternative representation of female athletes (The Guardian, 2026). Social media therefore creates a two way relationship that media influences audiences, but audiences can also influence the media environment.

My relationship with sports media has therefore changed from simply consuming it to critically interpreting it. I still love sport, but I no longer look at a female athlete's image in quite the same way. I notice who is represented, how they are represented and how I respond. I have realised that the media does not simply reflect society; it can help shape what society notices and values. Behind every photograph is an athlete who has trained, struggled, competed and achieved something. I now understand that being visible is not the same as being represented fairly. These representations do not only affect women in sport today; they also shape the expectations of the next generation. Young girls growing up with a passion for sport learn from the media around them and when these representations are normalised, they begin to believe that being judged by their appearance is simply part of being a female athlete. As an audience member, I cannot control every image I see - but I can question the message I take from them and challenge what is presented as normal. By being critical and responsive to the representation of female athletes, I can help shape what a 'normal' experience looks like for our female athletes of the future.

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