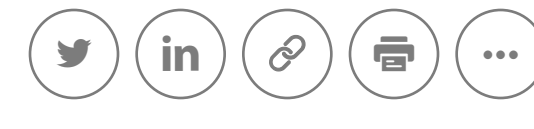


Behind the study that called out media disparities in women's sports

BY JOHN OURAND
11.8.2021



— Consultants Ed Desser and John Kosner said the NCAA women's basketball tournament should be worth between \$81 million and \$112 million per year. GETTY IMAGES

Former **NBA** executive Ed Desser, who now runs a sports media consulting company, was sitting in his California office earlier this year when he noticed a message from Roberta Kaplan, a lawyer hired by the **NCAA** to investigate gender equity issues.

Desser almost overlooked the email, which came to his general information mailbox on his website, alongside ads for fast Internet, cellphone plans and Canadian meds.

Kaplan asked Desser if he would be interested in talking about the NCAA's gender equity review. Desser was dubious.

"We're just a bunch of pro sports media people," Desser said. "What do we know about gender equity?"

Desser flipped the note to John Kosner, a former **NBA** and **ESPN** executive who also runs his own consultancy business and works with Desser frequently.

The two contacted Kaplan, who was tasked with developing a gender equity study based on a TikTok video that an Oregon women's basketball player posted this year that showed a shabby workout room for the women's tournament compared to a gleaming one for the men's tournament.

Kaplan told Desser and Kosner that she wanted them to provide guidance on the media disparities between the men's and women's tournaments.

To-Do List

Ed Desser and John Kosner came up with about 16 recommendations for how the NCAA can grow the women's tournament. Here are 10 of their ideas.

1. Create a single Final Four weekend in the same city with the men's and women's tournaments.
2. Push ESPN to move the women's final to broadcast TV.
3. Use March Madness branding for both tournaments.
4. Sell media rights to the women's tournament on its own.
5. Divide the "Other Championships" package where, for example, college baseball and softball can be grouped together.
6. Get more cross promotion between ESPN and CBS/Turner.
7. Encourage ESPN to produce "SportsCenter" on-site at the combined Final Four.
8. Require a "Megacast" around the Final Four and championship games.
9. Have one combined selection show for the men's and women's tournaments.
10. Get the NCAA to hire a chief business officer.

"I had this preexisting notion that it's probably a marketplace deal," Desser said. "The NCAA is competent. It knows what it's doing. I didn't really expect there to be a there, there."

Kosner was more convinced that the media portion of Kaplan's report would show a shocking disparity. After all, Kosner headed up ESPN's digital group in 2011, when ESPN renewed a deal for all NCAA championships, outside of football and men's basketball, in one package. ESPN signed an original deal for that package in 2001.

Kosner often referred to that package as the most underappreciated deal in the business, because of the huge amount of highly rated programming it contained.

ESPN pays only \$34 million per year for 30 NCAA championships, including the highly rated women's basketball tournament and softball World Series. That deal runs through 2024 and is worth just 4.5% of the annual value of the men's basketball tournament, Kosner said.

In an analysis that was made public this summer, Kosner and Desser believe the women's basketball tournament alone should be worth between \$81 million and \$112 million per year.

ESPN's "Other Championships" rights package that includes the women's tournament accounts for 5%-6% of all of ESPN's gross ratings points in a given year, Desser said.

"That actually puts it on par with baseball on ESPN," he said. "It puts it way ahead of **MLS**, way ahead of **UFC**. It's a huge amount of tonnage. For \$34 million, you're getting 5% or 6% of your gross rating points? This is a steal for ESPN, and I suspect they're not particularly appreciative of us uncovering that."

For Desser and Kosner, the media disparity could be seen well beyond media rights.

Continuing The Discussion

Ed Desser and John Kosner will be joined by Big East Commissioner Val Ackerman to present "NCAA Media & Sponsorship/Gender Equity Report: Behind the Scenes" at Sports Business Journal's Media Innovators conference in New York City this week. For more information, visit www.media-innovators-series.com.

"We spent four months digging into all the details and running numbers," Desser said. "We concluded that the women's tournament is a huge property that is underappreciated."

Desser and Kosner developed a list of around 16 recommendations, such as allowing the women's tournament to use March Madness branding — something that already has been adopted (see chart).

Desser and Kosner are pushing for the NCAA to host the men's and women's Final Fours in the same city, at the same time, as soon as 2023. The NCAA likely would not run a combined Final Four until 2027, because host cities have already been awarded the events through 2026, Kosner said.

Desser and Kosner said a combined Final Four would follow a model set by the U.S. Open tennis tournament in New York each year, and where the women's draw oftentimes is more popular than the men's.

"When you watch the U.S. Open tennis tournament, everything is presented in a first-class, equitable manner," Kosner said. "Tennis is different than basketball, of course, but this year the ratings for the women's (U.S. Open) final exceeded the ratings for the men's. There's growth that's possible, and not just for the women going forward. But also the cross promotion with the men."

A combined Final Four would help the women's tournament build its revenue by attracting more sponsors, Kosner said.

"One of the practical effects of having the men's and women's Final Four take place on the same weekend in different cities is that all of these NCAA sponsors have just gone to the men's tournament," Kosner said. "This is an issue where many in the industry are just so used to looking at things the way that we've always looked at things. This was really an eye opener for us as to what we think is possible and what's coming for NCAA women's sports the rest of this decade."

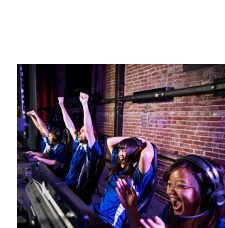
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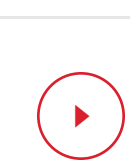
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