



# Make this the season we end discriminatory sports coverage

BY RISA F. ISARD AND DR. E. NICOLE MELTON

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**T**he WNBA's 25th season tipped off this month. The league says to "Count It" — so we did.

A'ja Wilson, the 2020 WNBA MVP who is Black, received half as much media coverage last season as Sabrina Ionescu, the first pick in the 2020 WNBA draft who played in just three games before a season-ending injury and who is white.

This is not an isolated occurrence. We counted every time each active WNBA player's name was mentioned in more than 550 articles that ESPN, CBS Sports, and Sports Illustrated posted online over the course of the 2020 season. We controlled for points and rebounds and found that across the league, Black WNBA players received significantly less coverage — seemingly because they're Black. The box score: An average 52 media mentions for Black players, compared to 118 for white players.

This disparity is all the more troubling considering last summer's nationwide racial reckoning that coincided with the season. The league and WNBA Players Association dedicated the season to social justice. Players donned warmup shirts proclaiming "SAY HER NAME" and "EQUALITY." The game court prominently displayed "BLACK LIVES MATTER." All season long, game jerseys elevated Breonna Taylor's name. But when it came to their own names and their own equality? Black players seemed to find themselves on the outside of media storylines.

Bias in sport is not new. But that doesn't make it inevitable. The WNBA's press releases in 2020 only showed a bias toward scorers. The more a player scored, the more often press releases mentioned them. As they say: "Count it."

To make this the season we end discriminatory sports coverage, we need to be aware of how implicit bias and white privilege manifest throughout media coverage. We need

to Lift Black Voices.

Closing the gap on specific disparities — made clear in our research — can drive the greatest change.

### **Black WNBA players won postseason awards. White women won coverage.**

Black WNBA players are having a shining moment on and off the court. They won 80% of postseason awards, including: Most Valuable Player, Rookie of the Year, Defensive Player of the Year, Most Improved Player of the Year, and Sixth Woman of the Year. And they are championing social justice advocacy. Yet the media gives them half the play. Literally.

Despite the accolades and the fact that 80% of the players are Black, the three names most mentioned by the media? White players.

Giannis Antetokounmpo would never be the only Black NBA player mentioned more often than Adam Silver. So why is A'ja Wilson the only Black player mentioned more often than WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert?

Media outlets' statements last summer in support of antiracism mean little when simultaneously their media practices went unchecked and perpetuated bias, whatever the intention. The erasure of Black female athletes and their contributions predates the civil rights movement. This can be the season we finally put an end to it.

### **The benefits of being a white player include freedom of expression.**

Historically, WNBA players and other athletes in women's sports have been held to strict standards of femininity. Sports marketers endorsed the idea that "sex sells" and encouraged athletes to emphasize their (hetero) sexuality to garner media attention. Today's players have rebuked this approach, opting for what feels most authentic, whether that be Jordans or heels.

But the standards still exist when we look at media coverage — and are perhaps highest for Black players. Black WNBA players who present as more masculine received an average of just 44 media mentions. Meanwhile, white athletes who present more masculine received more than five times that amount (an average of 212).

These numbers make clear that white players have more leeway to express themselves

in a variety of ways. They are forgiven — and even embraced — for being different and breaking the norm. Their Black teammates, however, are penalized with less media coverage when they do the same.

### **Media disparities fuel economic disparities.**

Media mentions matter because they set in motion a cycle of financial benefits that at present compound to benefit white athletes. The boost starts as “earned media value.” Sometimes called marketing value, the score represents what it would have cost to place an ad with the same reach. The cycle continues as media coverage begets more media coverage, and subsequently more earned media credits. Eventually, media coverage results in sponsorship opportunities and tangible payouts. White players getting more than their fair share of the storylines means they are the winners of this media game. Case in point: Breanna Stewart, the second-most mentioned player in 2020, is an incredible athlete. But is she the only player in the past decade worthy of a signature shoe?

Fair representation, self-expression and financial equity require nothing less than accountability and action. We must make this the season that ends discriminatory coverage.

Sports media must commit to antiracist practices. Players, agents, and the Women's National Basketball Players Association — all of whom have shown their power to create change — should continue to advocate for and organize around practices to Lift Black Voices.

In the words of the WNBA's own Aerial Powers: “Put some respect on my name.”

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