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**OPINION**

# Women in sports: Defy impostor syndrome with FAST thinking

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It's not unusual to work in the sports business for decades and still ask: "Am I qualified? Do I deserve this position? Am I good enough?" This mental dialogue is unrelenting — and particularly common among women.

The good news: We can overcome impostor syndrome. And we need you to.

We can combat the problem by defining it. The psychological term impostor syndrome refers to a pattern of behavior wherein high-achieving individuals doubt their abilities, ascribing accomplishments to luck rather than merit or skill, and persistently fear being exposed as a fraud. The KPMG 2020 Women's Leadership Summit revealed 75% of executive women have experienced impostor syndrome at points throughout their careers and 85% believe it is commonly experienced by women across corporate America.

In sports, women represent record participation rates and growing occupation in leadership positions, yet still feel like impostors. Why? Even with more experience and training than men, women receive lower returns and encounter more questions regarding their legitimacy. Look at how, in 2020, Kim Ng made history being hired by the Miami Marlins as the first female general manager after working 30 years in baseball operations — 21 years in the front office. Most consider her to be the most overqualified candidate to become a GM.

Yes, 2020 was a year of many firsts. However, the constant instances of "the first woman in sports history to ..." reiterates the misconception that women are impostors. We must overcome impostor syndrome to finish the firsts, and leap from diverse representation to inclusive collaboration.

An acronym helps overcome such preposterous thoughts. We're going FAST so you can Find advice, Affirm worth, Support one another, and find Truth, as specific solutions to move past this challenge.

**FIND** the advice of a trusted resource. Identifying a mentor or a sponsor is extremely useful, because we tend to get tunnel vision when we feel like a fraud. Having a second opinion to work through our thoughts and insecurities can help uncover the flaws in our arguments within ourselves, and consciously build the confidence to unapologetically share our ideas and opinions. Due to the masculine nature and representation of sports and sports leadership, perhaps try to find champions outside of the industry. And if the institutionalization of male sports leaders clouds our judgments, secure trusted resources from multiple sources.

**AFFIRM** how you see your worth. Affirmations are a simple, extremely effective way — manifested through a personal process — to restructure how we see ourselves. We, as women in sports, will not receive these affirmations and acceptance from our patriarchal society, so internally we have to condition ourselves and practice them daily in order to combat the male-controlled commentary. Operating within the competitive sports landscape, women must have intrinsic motivation and use self-affirmations like:

- I know what I am doing.
- I deserve everything I've accomplished.
- I am enough. I am here for a reason.

**SUPPORT** others — and accept reciprocation. Fraudulent thoughts can completely be altered by a support system. They will be there for you when you can't think of an affirmation, when you don't know how to accept your successes, and when overall, you just don't feel worthy. When you find your tribe/team/pack, they will challenge and support you. In sports, mentorship is particularly important to women, as women are more likely to experience barriers to advancement. Through mentorship, women understand themselves, their operating styles, and how to adapt to gain more opportunities. Additionally, we must see and accept support from others. After Ng's historical hire, the overwhelming support — particularly from Women in Sports and Events — helped amplify the moment by replaying content from 20 years ago when Ng was first honored as a WISE Women of the Year award recipient.

**TRUTH** will anchor your worth. Knowing our actions will speak for women, and women can speak to their actions, we must be conscious of triggers. Triggers can be anything that sets off an emotion in our brain. But triggers aren't truth. With sports being dominated by men, there is a plethora of discrimination — both overt and covert — against women. When we hear this constant questioning of our knowledge, our qualifications, our promotions, our dress, our place in sports, we must recognize the trigger and we mustn't emotionally react; otherwise, once again we'll be evaluated harshly. But truth is on our side. Example: In 2019 when Darren Rovell tweeted "Texas Tech will be first Under Armour team to play for the college basketball title," he triggered a rage of responses by disregarding two other teams — the University of South Carolina and University of Notre Dame women's programs — which had already represented Under Armour on the biggest stage, winning the national championship in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

As women progress in their careers, becoming better represented in this male-dominated profession, we'll need to find ways to better align our work with the expectations of our audiences. When we think FAST, we normalize that we, as women, belong in sports.

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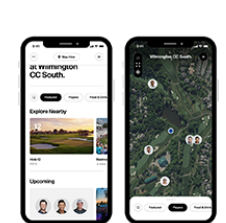
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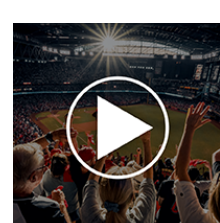
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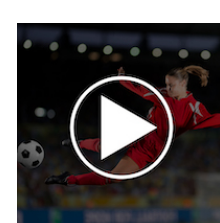
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