

Lowering the Rims Roundtable: A move for equality?

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There is an overarching issue that stands out when someone proposes the idea of lowering the hoops in women's basketball. It is the way in which American or North American society has defined athleticism and athletic ability as it has been normally associated with power and performance sports. In the power and performance model, speed, strength, and explosive power are paramount and typified by male athletes in sports like basketball, and football. This is reinforced by media coverage, 90% of which is dedicated to men's basketball, football and baseball in the United States. Since female basketball players dunk less frequently than male players, the perception exists that the women's game is not as exciting as the men's game because women "play below" the rim. Playing below the rim is usually tied to the idea that there are fewer "highlight reel" plays in women's basketball (i.e. less dunking or alley-oops). Essentially, the qualities that we value in athletes in the United States are not necessarily on average the physiological strengths of women in comparison to men at least at this point in time. (Yes we need to consider individual differences of female vs. male athletes and yes female athletes have made vast improvements over the last 100 years in terms of physical skill and performance to close the gap.)

With that in mind there are some other things to consider. On the one hand, if playing above the rim is what generates viewership and consumption of men's basketball then perhaps lowering the rims would actually create additional excitement around women's basketball. When Lisa Leslie, Candace Parker, Brittney Griner, to name a few, dunked in practices or games it generated a number of news stories about them and women's basketball that may not otherwise have been written or reported on.

On the other hand, while lowering the hoops may create more dunking and alley-oops which is supposedly what generates viewers, it may simultaneously reinforce notions of athleticism that have been socially constructed to privilege male athletes over female athletes. Thus lowering the hoops does little challenge the idea of what athleticism is. Instead, lowering the hoops reinforces the idea that if women are to be taken seriously and considered real athletes they need to replicate aspects of the men's game. Lowering the hoops may leave the sport open to continued criticism because the action could be seen as reinforcing the idea that women aren't good or explosive enough to dunk, therefore women's basketball is STILL not worth watching. For example, Diana Taurasi argued that lowering the hoops will further marginalize female basketball players by creating an additional "logistical hurdle" they need to overcome in order to excel in their sport.

Lowering the hoops creates a double-edged sword in which female basketball players may consistently recreate primary aspects of the men's game so that they can be taken more seriously by sports fans but then may be criticized for lowering the rim in order to do so.