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The Media's Representation of Female Athletes During Drug Scandals

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Communication Studies

Bridgewater State University

May 1, 2024

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## Introduction

Watching sports is one of America's favorite pastimes. Whether it's tuning on a baseball game, the Olympics, or basketball, people love to watch. However, the representation of women in sports is not as prominent as men. Athletes are often portrayed in various lights by the media. Sha'Carri Richardson, Tara Davis-Woodhall, and Brittney Griner are three athletes who have made a splash in their respective sports. Richardson and Davis-Woodhall are some of the biggest faces in track and field being a part of Team USA, and Griner is one of the most well-known female basketball players being a member of the Phoenix Mercury and Team USA. One thing these three women have in common besides their athletic success is the fact that they were all a part of a drug scandal involving marijuana (Axson, 2022, Dedaj, 2023, Futterman, 2021). What they have in common is their cases were highlighted in the media and became topics of conversation in the news.

Women's representation in sports is a topic that is not always discussed; however, it is extremely important. The media framed these women in many different ways, and I think it's important to note how women are truly represented by the media. Male athletes have constant media coverage, prime time television slots, and are seen as inspirational figures for young children; however, woman athletes are not given the same platform and I think it's important to try and understand why. This underrepresentation has persisted in women's sports for years. The notion of underrepresentation is contrasted with focus on oversexualization of women. This is still happening in 2024 and we see this with the 2024 Track and Field kits for the women athletes. These feature extremely high cut shorts which have people talking about how women are still being treated as "second class citizens" for their Olympic uniforms (Encinas, 2024). This is just one current topic that shows the relevance of how women are still seen as less than in

sports. Understanding the way that the media frames women athletes, particularly during drug scandal, leads us to understand why women's sports are underrepresented and how unfair that treatment is. I will begin this project by providing background on how women in sports are framed, then perform a framing analysis on how the media framed these three women during drug scandal and draw conclusions on how I thought they were framed as victims of the circumstances.

### Literature Review

Being a woman in sports is not always easy. Women are faced with the fact that they are seen differently than male athletes are at times. The media is not always focused on the success of an athlete, but more focused on the choices they make and the way they look. Scholars have researched the idea that the media has a way of framing women athletes in a negative light which in turn allows the public to interpret them in the same way at times. This literature review will focus on the research that has been done on framing and how female athletes are portrayed.

While many people enjoy watching sports weekly, most of this exposure is directed towards male athletes. Research revealed that in 2018, the WNBA regular season received less coverage than the NBA Summer League, and women's sports in the U.S. only accounted for 4% of media coverage. (Springer, 2019). People are not getting sports coverage that focuses on all different sports, particularly women's sports. You would think that the underrepresentation of women athletes would not spread to the Olympics, where all athletes are supposed to be portrayed. However, women were excluded from Olympic participation until 1896 and in the 1900 Olympics, only 1% of participants were women (Bunce, 2014). Even then, women athletes did not have as many opportunities to participate because certain things were seen as dangerous. Women were finally allowed to compete in the ski jump competition in 2014. That said, sexist

attitudes toward women in some sports died hard however, Alexander Arefyev, the Russian men's ski jump coach, said "If a man gets a serious injury, it's still not fatal, but for women it could end much more seriously. Women have another purpose—to have children, to do housework, to create hearth and home" (Bunce, 2014, p 38). Here we see that even when women athletes are given the opportunity for exposure and to participate in new sports they are seen as fragile. The 2012 Olympic Games were the first games since social media had become a prominent factor in society. *Time* magazine praised the 2012 Olympics as "The Year of the Women" and this shows that it took several years for women athletes to gain the same recognition as men (Creedon, 2014). Although *Time* said 2012 was "The Year of the Women", women's sports do not get the media coverage that men do. The time that women receive the most sports coverage is during the Olympics. Subsequently, women athletes have not been given the same opportunities as male athletes and I think that factors in on why they are underrepresented.

When women do receive media coverage in sports it is often not for their athletic accomplishments. Instead, the media focuses on other attributes such as a woman's sexuality. Research has shown that some of the best women athletes are talked about most because of their looks and are not credited for their athletic abilities. For example, Crosby (2016) examined an article published in the *New York Times* where Jere Longman wrote about Lolo Jones. Lolo Jones is a well-known female athlete who competed in hurdling as well as bobsledding for Team USA. Longman stated that her media coverage and success are "not based on achievement but on her exotic beauty and on a sad and cynical marketing campaign" (Crosby, 2016, p 228). They found that Lolo Jones was labeled a "vixen, virgin, victim" and was only highlighted because of her looks, not because she is a 3x Olympian. Similarly, MacArthur, Angelini, Billings, and Smith

(2016) found that the majority of media attention that is given to women's sports at the Olympics was devoted to gymnastics. However, during this "networks highlighted women athletes' fragility and attractiveness during the broadcast" which takes away from their true achievements. There are other sports besides gymnastics that female athletes should be highlighted for, and yet that is the main focus. Scholars have found that even when female athletes are approached about their journey of being an athlete, the conversation tends to shift. Interviewers will go "down a path cluttered with women's sports narratives that fall into clichéd categories about overcoming sexism or coming back from pregnancy" (Springer, 2019, p. 16). If the media covered female athletes' stories the same way that they covered a male athlete, the world would have a better idea of who these athletes truly are.

One of the reasons why women's sports coverage is skewed is because of what is known as the double bind. In her book, Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) defines a double bind as:

A rhetorical construct that posits two and only two alternatives, one or both penalizing the person being offered them. In the history of humans, such choices have been constructed to deny women access to power and, where individuals manage to slip past their constraints, to undermine their exercise of whatever power they achieve. (p.13)

This idea limits women from being able to make choices and have power in their own decisions at times because of the bind that is placed on them. Women athletes are faced with the bind of feminine/athlete, but it is interesting how these binds occur depending on the athlete. Lavelle's (2014) analysis of basketball star Brittney Griner "exposes that Griner's remarkable success—as a 6-foot-10-inch-tall athlete who happens to be masculine-presenting and a lesbian of color—is praised, but to the detriment of other female athletes". Griner was praised as an athlete because she has masculine features, however, female athletes are constantly spoken about for being either

too masculine or too feminine. An athlete like Lolo Jones who is more feminine is seen for her looks and not her athletic ability. Either way, women athletes are criticized or praised for being too masculine or too feminine and “have no chance of winning.”

Women athletes of color face even greater hurdles. They are often misrepresented and devalued as women and athletes. Sha’Carri Richardson, Tara DavisWoodhall, Brittney Griner, and even Lolo Jones are all athletes of color who have been misrepresented by the media. For example, Crosby (2016) examined an incident that happened with Don Imus; “after the NCAA Women’s National Championship basketball game, radio host Don Imus, a white male, labeled the runner-up Rutgers basketball team members “nappy-headed hos” in contrast to the “cute” Tennessee players” (p.234). Crosby found that this comment touches upon sexuality, class, and gender but it also is commenting on black women’s appearances when it should have been touching upon the success and faults of the Rutgers and Tennessee basketball teams. The comment “nappy” had a deeper meaning and using that reinforced the negative stereotypes about black women. Crosby found that the focus is rarely on the success of a team, but instead on the appearances of the players. This gender and color misrepresentation extends to the Olympics. For example, Angelini, Billings, Macarthur, Bissell, & Smith (2014) examined the role of race within athletic performance. In contrast to the negative coverage of women athletes, they found that when NBC announcer Bob Costas stated, after Gabby Douglas won the gymnastics all around, that “It’s safe to say that there are some young African American girls out there who tonight are saying to themselves, ‘Hey, I’d like to try that, too’” (p. 117). This suggests that it is important to have positive portrayals of athletes of different backgrounds to inspire others. This type of commentary is important because it makes people see the value of an athlete and that representation of race, class, and gender are important. Although this was seen as a hopeful

statement, Costas's positive comments about female athleticism, particularly about black female athletes, are often few and far between.

Female athletes are constructed in a way where they have to constantly navigate a double bind and their physical features are often the focus more than their athletic abilities. Framing analyses can be an effective way to come to these conclusions. The notion of framing is something that is used by everyone when they are communicating. Framing is “the process whereby communicators act—consciously or not—to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more or less noticeable. . . . They are located in the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture at large” (Kuypers, 2009, p. 182). The way that someone conveys a message is very important because it frames the way the audience sees the topic. Framing scholars argue that news media “frame” an audience's interpretation of events, people, or ideas (Goffman, 1974) by focusing on specific parts of a topic. Frames are used to help us understand information and categorize and identify themes. Research has shown that “frames do four things; they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies” (Entman, 1993). Scholars found that people use metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images to frame something that is happening. Overall, the way that something is framed shapes how an audience can interpret something. To conduct a framing analysis, researchers would identify the key frames used in a piece of writing, analyze the underlying assumptions, and describe how these frames may influence audience interpretations. By picking out the frames that are used by writers we can see how they're trying to influence their audience to think about a certain situation.



Framing has been used to define and describe sports in a number of ways. Women in sports are constantly visually framed through pictures and videos. For example, Dauber (2001) examined framing and found that “audiences view images as evidence, rather than representations, rendering them vulnerable to the power of the image in photojournalism in a way we are not in other contexts.” According to Cohen and Wolfsfeld (1993), the media play a vital role in the portrayal of men and women in sports because of the socially constructed reality in the ongoing construction of gender. Studies on the visual representations of female athletes have found that female athletes are often framed using the athletic passive, showing that their femininity and sexuality are emphasized more than their athleticism, rather than the athletic active frame, that highlights athletes in an action shot (Smith, L. R., Clavio, G., & Lang, A, 2021). The way that woman athletes are framed for their femininity and not their athleticism takes away from the value of their accomplishments. This may be seen in the certain angles an athlete is filmed or how they are depicted by the media. We also see framing through political sports commentators. When Don Imus called the Rutgers basketball team members “nappy-headed hos” in contrast to the “cute” Tennessee players we were able to see an example of what framing is (Crosby, 2016). Imus was framing the Rutgers players in a poor light because of the color of their skin, as he is a political commentator. We can see the way that women athletes are portrayed through the media, news, and television.

### Methodology

This study is about how the media framed women athletes, in particular Sha’Carri Richardson, Tara Davis-Woodhall, and Brittney Griner, for drug scandal. I will be using a qualitative method to study the way women athletes are framed for drug scandals by performing a textual analysis. According to Frey, L., Botan, C., & Kreps, G. (1999), “textual analysis is the

method communication researchers use to describe and interpret the characteristics of a recorded or visual message.” The purpose of textual analysis is to describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in newspapers. The specific type of textual analysis that I used was a framing analysis. Through this, I can analyze the frames being used by the media to describe these three female athletes during their drug scandals.

A framing analysis looks at the way a certain event is communicated and what frames are present throughout. By performing a framing analysis, one may find the underlying messages in certain perspectives based on the way information is presented (Kuypers, 2009; Entman, 2007). Framing shows us how media outlets, individuals, government, etc. can create narratives about issues and shape public opinion. A framing analysis of how female athletes are framed for drug scandals is an effective way to see how the media portrays them. Through different newspapers, a reader can form an opinion on these specific scandals based on the way that the media is trying to portray their cases and what their main focus is.

To conduct this research, I collected a sample of 15 different news articles for Sha’Carri Richardson and Brittney Griner, and then 10 news articles for Tara Davis-Woodhall from major newspapers within the United States. Each case study examined female athletes who had recently dealt with a drug scandal. The goal of this research is to examine how newspapers framed each of these athletes. The articles were analyzed spanning from the date of the scandal to two weeks after the scandal to understand the frames and how they changed over time; July 1, 2021-July 15, 2021 for Richardson; April 25, 2023-May 9, 2023 for Davis-Woodhall; and March 5, 2022-March 19, 2022 for Griner. All of the articles picked were over 300 words and were from either *Nexis Uni* or Google.

For Sha'Carri Richardson, I began conducting my search for articles for each case study on the database *Nexis Uni*, which is a database that has hundreds of newspapers. When choosing the articles, I also ensured that they were all over 300 words and within the dates July 1, 2021-July 15, 2021. When searching I ensured the location was within the United States. The newspapers included *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Daily News*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and the *Chicago Herald* to look into how Richardson was framed throughout her drug scandal.

For Tara Davis-Woodhall I collected a sample of 10 different news articles from major newspapers. During this period, my two-week timeline spanned from April 25, 2023-May 9, 2023. I looked on *Nexis Uni*, with the location as the United States, and only found two major newspapers. I then expanded that search to Google and was able to add more articles from *CNN*, *USA Today*, *AP News*, *Dallas News*, *FOX News*, *Washington Times*, and *CBS Sports*. These are all reliable sources as they are news articles.

The third case study is Brittney Griner. I collected a sample of 15 different news articles from major newspapers. My two-week timeline was March 5, 2022-March 19, 2022. I looked on *Nexis Uni*, with the locations as the United States, Washington, Pennsylvania, Florida, Iowa, and Illinois. Through this I was able to find major articles from *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Daily News*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. These are major newspapers that discussed Griner throughout the beginning stages of her scandal, including 2 opinion articles from newspapers.

The next section presents the results of each case study. I begin each case study by briefly describing the circumstances surrounding each woman's drug scandal. Then I offer what I identified as the dominant frames for each athlete.

## Analysis

### **Sha'Carri Richardson**

Sha'Carri Richardson was on the path to be a part of the 2020 USA Track and Field Olympic team and anchor the team to success. The former Louisiana State University star started her professional career in 2019 and never looked back. She started training with three-time Olympic medalist Dennis Mitchell, who tested positive for banned testosterone in 1998 and served a two-year ban. They have an amazing relationship and he is a supportive coach to her (Futterman, 2021). Richardson had been asked about doping in May and she responded by saying, "We had a conversation before he started training me and he was transparent with me. I know from the relationship we have that he will never put me in a position to be in something like that. Y'all don't have to worry about any doping situations" (The New York Times, 2021). Unfortunately, Sha'Carri Richardson did have a doping situation arise in late June 2021.

Richardson, one of the best sprinters Team USA had in 2021 and made it clear when she won first place in the women's 100-meter race at the U.S. Track and Field trials in Oregon in June 2021 (Draper, Macur, 2021). However, she unfortunately had a positive test for marijuana with the sample that was collected after that race. A few weeks before this, Richardson had found out that her biological mother had passed away and noted it as being "definitely nerve-shocking" (Draper, Macur, 2021). Although she was raised by her grandmother. Richardson had used marijuana as a way to cope with her mother's death and stress while she was in Oregon for the Olympic trials. Richardson did not deny what the test results had shown, and she owned up to what had happened. Richardson went on an interview with the *Today Show* where she opened up about her use of marijuana and how she was affected after finding out about her mother's passing. Here she took full responsibility for what had happened and owned up to her mistakes.

this was followed by a tweet by Richardson stating, “I am human” (Guerrero, 2021). This was proven to be out-of-competition use and she completed a substance abuse program for this. Because of this Richardson received a 30-day suspension and her qualifying time for the Olympic Games was invalidated. Her suspension started on June 28, 2021, and ended just before the track and field events began at the Olympic Games. There was still hope that she would have the opportunity to compete in the games and an enormous uproar on social media regarding her situation (Futterman, 2021). However, she was unable to compete in the women’s 100 meter or the team 4x100 due to the invalidity of her qualifying time. Richardson’s case led to a conversation on whether or not athletes should be penalized for marijuana. As this was a hot topic of conversation ultimately this decision was out of the hands of the USADA and there was nothing Richardson could do anymore.

Richardson’s drug scandal was framed in different ways by the media. One of the most prominent frames for Richardson was the “only human” frame. The idea of this frame is that Sha’Carri made a mistake much like we all have before, except she got caught for it. This frame focuses on the idea that she is only human and that she made a poor choice because of her emotional state. The media used their articles to tell Richardson’s story but tried to give her a voice in the process by humanizing her. *The New York Times* made it a point to highlight what Richardson had tweeted saying, “I am human – I’m you, I just happen to run a little faster” (Draper, Macur, 2021). The media portrayed these tweets in an empathetic way about what had happened to Richardson considering she is only human and was grieving the loss of her mother. *The New York Times* also showed Richardson’s heart by including her apology: “I greatly apologize if I let you guys down, and I did” (Draper, Macur, 2021). This is showing she feels like she let down her family, fans, and sponsors. Although Richardson seems to be very

confident in herself, she does have a heart and her fans were reminded of that by her apologies and feeling like a relatable human. The *Chicago Daily Herald* emphasized the death of Richardson's biological mother. They used this part of her story as the sole reason she used marijuana, even when she knew THC was a banned substance. They quoted Richardson saying she was "definitely triggered and blinded by emotions, blinded by badness, and hurting, and hiding hurt" (Pells, Graham, 2021). This was trying to show how much was going on in Richardson's head. By trying to say that she was triggered and blinded by emotions is making this look like a much deeper conversation into mental health, which in turn humanizes Richardson. The *Tampa Bay Times* highlighted these struggles with a quote: "Who am I to tell you how to cope when you're dealing with pain and struggles you've never had to experience before?" (Associated Press, 2021). This is important to note because the media was pushing what Sha'Carri was sharing about the situation. The media portrayed that she was a human dealing with grief and broke the rules because of it. The media was trying to make their readers feel bad for Richardson in her devastating situation, but some failed to acknowledge that Richardson knew that this was a banned substance and that she should not have used it in the first place. Although, marijuana is legal in the state of Oregon, where Richardson used it, it is a banned substance in accordance to WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency) laws. However, by trying to humanize Richardson the media tried to portray an image that she should not have been punished for what she did because she was going through a rough time in her life. The media was trying to make people have sympathy for Richardson not being able to compete because her mother had passed away. Although she is human, this situation was larger than her struggles; it was for the Olympics and her judgment was clouded. This was important because the Olympics only happen every four years, and Richardson missed out on this opportunity.

Another media frame was “unfair” treatment. The media portrayed her situation as unfair treatment because of her punishment and the timing of it. Richardson only received a 30-day ban because it was found that the substance was not used during competition and she completed courses for this. However, the media highlighted this as such a harsh and unfair punishment because it happened to be right before the Olympics. For example, *USA Today* said “WADA will admit that policing people for pot use is a waste of its time and resources, particularly when there are actual dopers to catch and punish” (Armour, 2021). Richardson getting in trouble for marijuana seems unfair when there are more punishable acts being made. The media was pushing the idea that marijuana should not have been WADA’s biggest priority. There were situations with athletes using banned substances that are performance enhancing that WADA should have been paying attention to more like Kamila Valieva. Valieva is Russian figure skater who was allowed to compete after trimetazidine, a medication that is used to treat heart conditions and allows for more blood flow to your heart, was found in her sample (Richtel, 2021). In another article *USA Today* said “Sha’Carri Richardson’s anti-doping rule violation was not a missed drug test or forged hospital records. It was not an anabolic steroid like stanozolol or nandrolone. It was marijuana” (Schad, 2021). The way that this sentence is written is trying to show the frame of marijuana not being a big deal in comparison to an anabolic steroid. The *Wyoming Tribune-Eagle* also highlighted how even government officials thought this was too harsh of a punishment: “Ocasio-Cortez and Raskin [democratic members of the U.S. House of representatives] wrote ‘the ban on marijuana is a significant and unnecessary burden on athletes civil liberties’” (Pells, 2021). When two government officials are referring to Richardson’s case as a burden of athlete’s civil liberties, they are pushing the idea that this punishment was extremely unfair. As the United States has continually shifting laws regarding the legalization of

marijuana this is a conflicting statement to make. However, talking about how government officials wrote letters on behalf of Richardson to WADA shows that they thought the punishment was too harsh. This is important because by highlighting the fact that marijuana is legal in 19 states in the U.S. and this rule violates athletes' rights, the media is focusing on WADA being the problem. This situation was framed in a way to make the punishment unfair. This raises the question of: what they are trying to teach people? When people have to be punished for their actions, they learn for the future to do better. I think the media was pushing the idea that she did not deserve this punishment because of how successful she was and what success she could have led the United States to in the Olympics. The media was pushing the idea that marijuana is not a huge concern, as it is not a performance-enhancing substance, although WADA claims it to be. It technically is a banned substance, however, so it is difficult for the media to try and push this idea when it is the rules that Richardson made a poor choice and she has to suffer the consequences.

A final frame the media used to portray Richardson was her "bold personality". The media has highlighted her bold personality and statements that she makes, but also the fact that she can back it up with her talent. *The New York Times* talked about her look and Richardson "knows her bravado and appearance can turn some people off. People around the track have told her to cut her hair and her nails and get rid of her eyelashes, saying they slow her down" (Futterman, 2021). This is important because Richardson is aware that her appearance and bravado can turn some people off, so the media will make it a point to comment on this because that is what makes Richardson so unique. Her self-confidence is framed as arrogance at times because Richardson knows she is the best and does not shy away from making it known. "Richardson blows dramatic kisses to the crowd and points at herself when a stadium announcer



introduces her before a race” (Futterman, 2021). Although she presents herself this way it tends to be the focus on conversation in the media or with announcers. The media often focuses on her confidence, however, there are always comments made about her appearance. In an article, USA Today highlighted how “She raced the year with purple, blue, and orange hair – colors that change depending on her mood, and what she feels is needed for a race” (Schad, 2021). The media does not often focus on other athletes’ appearances; however, it seems as if there are constant comments about her appearance. The focus on Richardson's appearance from certain newspapers took away from the coverage of her drug charges and her win at the Olympic trials. The focus was truly on her appearance and how bold she is in comparison to the other athletes. It may be Richardson’s goal, to show and be recognized for her personality, but her talent does speak for itself. This is important because women athletes face commentators’ harsh opinions often, especially women athletes of color. Instead of the media focusing on her skills, they focus on her personality.

### **Tara Davis-Woodhall**

Another successful track star who went through a similar situation is Tara Davis-Woodhall. Davis-Woodhall was a track and field athlete who competed in the indoor long jump. Davis was a part of the Team USA Track and Field Olympic team in 2020 where she placed 6th in the games for the women’s long jump final (Henderson, 2023). She is married to Paralympic Track athlete Hunter Woodhall who is successful in his own right and they have a YouTube Channel together. They are known as a power couple in the track world and even have a partnership with Lululemon. Being able to have a partner who shares her love for Track and Field, but also supports her day in and day out is what gets her by (Rosales, 2023).

Davis-Woodhall found success on February 16, 2023, when she won the USA Indoor Track and Field Championships in Albuquerque, New Mexico. After clearing 7.07 meters, Davis-Woodhall won the long jump. However, during competition Davis-Woodhall was dealing with several mental health issues including "Marriage, mental health, body issues... Everything you can think of" (Rosales, 2023). This was reported after Davis-Woodhall had just won the National Championships. These internal struggles that Davis-Woodhall alluded to potentially may have been tied to her use of marijuana but there was no confirmation of this. After the track and field championships, Davis-Woodhall submitted to a drug test that came back positive for THC on February 17<sup>th</sup>. Consequently, the USADA released a statement saying Davis-Woodhall was stripped of the national title that she had just won. The positive test meant Davis-Woodhall lost her title, as she was disqualified from all competitive results obtained on and subsequent to February 17. WADA allows for a reduced three-month suspension if the substance was used outside of competition and was unrelated to performance. Davis-Woodhall had her case reduced to a one-month suspension because she completed a substance abuse treatment program for use of cannabis per USADA requirements (Martin, 2023). Unlike Sha'Carri Richardson, Davis-Woodhall's scandal was not announced until after she had served her suspension, so she was able to do it behind closed doors and not have judgment from the media.

One of the prominent frames the media used to portray Davis-Woodhall was the loss of her title. The *Dallas Morning News* spoke of her ban saying, "Her ban concluded last week, but the penalty also includes the loss of the long jump title she won at indoor nationals shortly before the sample was collected" (*The Dallas Morning News*, 2023). There is a focus on what had happened to Davis because her suspension was over. The media was able to talk about the parameters of her suspension and how it occurred through a very simple reporting of her case

with very little detail. *Fox News* made sure to note that “Davis-Woodhall’s period of ineligibility was reduced to one month because her use of cannabis occurred out of competition and was unrelated to sports performance, and because she completed a substance abuse treatment program regarding her use of cannabis” (Dedaj, 2023). This is important because the media is making it a point to note that her cannabis use occurred out of competition and was unrelated to sports performance. This is framing her for the loss of her title and why it occurred, but this is also showing that she's taking responsibility for what had happened and was working to be able to get back to competing in a timely manner. However, it is important to note that in an interview with the *Albuquerque Journal* following her victory at the USA Track & Field Indoor National Championships, Davis-Woodhall noted that she was battling internal issues. The media has not framed her story via the internal issues that she may have been facing during this time and how that may have led her to use marijuana like Richardson. They have just spoken about the loss of her title and how that affected her eligibility. This is important because it is humanizing her as someone who is an elite level athlete who made a mistake and was battling internal issues much like other people are.

Another prominent frame the media used to portray Davis-Woodhall was why cannabis should not be used to ban athletes. Given that Davis-Woodhall’s scandal followed Sha’Carri Richardson's, the media made it a point to refer back to Richardson's incident. The media used a true frame of comparison between these two track athletes and their scandals. When talking about Davis-Woodhall's case Richardson was brought up. *USA Today* stated, “Sha’Carri Richardson tested positive for marijuana at the 2021 Olympic trials, disqualifying her first-place finish... and effectively knocking her out of the Tokyo Olympics” (Henderson, 2023). The discussion of Richardson’s suspension is important to discuss because Davis-Woodhall had her

national title stripped and Richardson was unable to compete in the grandest stage of all. Both of these elite athletes were stripped of their dreams because marijuana is a banned substance, which raises the question on whether or not this rule is fair. Additionally, Fox News discussed this further stating “The debate surrounding the use of marijuana took center stage when at the U.S. Olympic in 2021, 100-meter winner Sha’Carri Richardson had her title stripped and was banned from the Olympics due to a positive test” (Dedaj, 2023). This is important to note because, in Davis-Woodhall's case, there was not nearly as much discussion as there was with Richardson on whether or not THC should be a banned substance or not. The media bringing up Richardson's case tried to start the discussion again on whether or not marijuana should be a banned substance for athletes. The comparison between the two athletes is being used to spark a conversation so future athletes of this caliber do not have to deal with this same situation.

### **Brittney Griner**

Brittney Griner is one of the most well-known faces in women’s basketball. She is a two-time Olympic athlete for Team USA and she also currently plays in the WNBA on the Phoenix Mercury. WNBA athletes do not make a large salary in comparison to their male counterparts in the NBA, therefore many of the players choose to play overseas during the eight-month off-season period. Griner has played in Russia on Ekaterinburg for seven years earning over \$1,000,000 per season—quadruple her WNBA salary (Ganguli, Abrams, Bubola, 2022). Griner is also a woman of color who is also a part of the LGBTQ+ community. She is a masculine-presenting woman and that is not always accepted in Russia, however, her experience playing basketball there is what led her to continue going back because she was protected by her team and had a good experience playing there (Schnell, Freeman, Bumbaca, 2022).

On her way back for the start of a new season in the Russian basketball league on February 17, 2022, Griner was taken into custody by Russian authorities for vape cartridges found in her carry-on luggage. They found hash oil in the cartridges, which is a form of THC and is illegal in Russia (Axson, 2022). Because of this, she was detained, and Russia can impose punishments of up to 10 years in prison. Griner was in Russian custody from February 2022 to December 2022. There were talks between the United States and the Russian government to try and get Griner back to the United States. Griner was able to return due to a prison exchange, however, this took months and her scandal was covered deeply by the media. She was taken into custody in February and the media was not alerted of this until March 6.

Brittney Griner's scandal appeared to be a larger one because it involved diplomatic relations between two countries. Moreover, Russia had just invaded Ukraine on February 24 that created an immense amount of tension between the United States and Russia because of America's support for Ukraine. Griner became a political pawn in the middle of this conflict. One of the dominant frames of Britney Griner's case was "silence" as they didn't want to exacerbate a tense political situation. Her family was devastated and terrified of what was going to happen to Griner as she was stuck in a foreign country. *USA Today* stated that "many who have a personal relationship with Griner said they are uncomfortable speaking about her for fear that any information or opinion could anger the Russians" (Axson, 2022). The family and friends of Griner were advised to not speak out on their feelings and curiosity if she was safe. The New York Times also reflected that by saying, "What we are trying to do now, of course, is be helpful and not do anything that'll place Brittney in any kind of danger or make her situation worse" (Ganguli, Abrams, Bubola, 2022). The media is trying to push the idea of silence and even the WNBA Commissioner has played a huge role in this saying, "Everyone is getting the strategy of

say less and push more privately behind the scenes” (Young, 2022). This is important because Griner was already in such a vulnerable state that her family and the government were trying to protect her. This situation was unknown territory and there had to be very careful steps taken during the discussion of this for Griner’s safety. Although the media was pushing this frame of staying silent out of fear, the media continues to publicize Griner’s scandal. If they truly were concerned about her safety this would have been kept more private and handled with her family, legal team, the WNBA, and Russia. The public was informed of the idea that her family was staying silent for her safety, yet celebrities and news outlets were speaking out about how she should return home.

Another prominent frame was portraying Brittney Griner as a victim. A writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* said, “I don’t normally ask readers for prayers... we do not know how she is holding up or what kind of conditions she is being held in” (Armstrong, 2022). The media chose to frame this in a way that it was life or death and that everyone should be praying to hope that she is safe. They were asking for prayers to hope she was safe because she is such a public figure. This raises the question of: what about everyone else that may be detained in a foreign country that is a United States citizen? The reader feels a pang of guilt and worry because this is such a well-known name. Similarly *The Philadelphia Daily News* similarly said, “She is in big trouble and needs some good energy shared on her behalf right about now” and that “(this) does not make the seven-time all-star a war criminal, nor does she deserve to be treated like one” (Armstrong, 2022). The writer from *The Philadelphia Daily News* was trying to persuade readers that what she did is not a bad thing. Is it to the level of a war criminal? No. However, they just continue to not acknowledge the fact that she brought an illegal drug into their country. There

seems to be an underlying message of having prayers and good thoughts about Griner to try and get her home safe, however having “good energy” was not going to do that.

An additional frame was related to the lengths the United States government was going to. The media portrayed the image that the government was on her side and that she had so much support, which she did. She was having some of the biggest government officials try and find a way back for her. *USA Today* stated, “US Congresswomen Shela Jackson Lee (D-Texas), who represents Griner’s home district in Houston, demanded her release and if there are challenges and concerns about her actions, it should be dealt with diplomatically and she should be released” (Bumbaca, 2022). The idea was being pushed that this should have been handled diplomatically. There was constant mention of the government's involvement in this case and I think that may have angered some people because of the idea that why was she getting this special treatment and assistance to try and come home. This is also framing the United States government in a positive way, that they are trying to help out one of their citizens during a difficult time. The State Department stated “We are closely engaged on this case and in frequent contact with Griner’s legal team” which shows that there was a push to get her out from not only her legal team but the government (*Chicago Daily Herald*, 2022). “The United States stepped up its push Friday for consular access to Brittney Griner” and was denied (*Chicago Daily Herald*, 2022). The frames of the government involvement are trying to prove a point that the United States cares about its citizens and that it wants people to be safe, however, I don't think there would have been nearly as much involvement if this was just an average person. The media portrayed the US as an immensely supportive country, doing all it could to get Griner to return. This is important because this was all happening while America was showing its support for

Ukraine and against Russia. This frame was being pushed because of the larger diplomatic issues at hand.

### Conclusion

The main similarity between the cases is that some parts of the media framed them as unfair. The frame of harsh punishment and the athlete being the victim related to each of the cases in some sort of way. The media framed these three women for being victims of rules and laws, however, they broke the rules and were involved with marijuana. Griner's case is slightly different than Tara Davis-Woodhall, and Sha'Carri Richardson because it did involve a foreign country. I understand that laws are different in foreign countries. However, marijuana is not legal throughout all of the United States, so regardless Griner knew better. I do think the main difference between these cases were the scale that they were all on. Griner's case was a world issue not just a United States issue. Richardson and Davis-Woodhall's cases were almost apples to apples completely the same situation. Richardson and Davis-Woodhall both being young athletes, Richardson being 21 at the time and Davis-Woodhall being 23 at the time, may have affected their coverage. They were humanized by the media during this time and I believe their age had a factor in this because they were both women who were fresh out of college and still were very young. At that point in many people's lives it is a transitional period where you have to learn to grow up, but we all make mistakes and that is a part of life.

It is pleasantly surprising that the media framed these three female athletes of color as being victims of the situation. I see this because, in my literature review, it was evident that the media frames were negative the majority of the time. We saw how Don Imus framed women of color as "nappy headed hoes" and diminished the success of black women athletes by making a comment about their race and class. These three women were recognized as being athletes, who



had something taken away from them because of a poor decision. The fact that they were recognized as being the successful athletes who did not deserve this, shows that women athletes are also important to the media. Because these women were framed as victims, people want to see them succeed in the future. I know after reading these articles I do want to see all three of these athletes be successful and make the correct changes which I feel like they already have. I don't think either of these three athletes would make the same mistake again by putting their career goals in Jeopardy once again.

The frames used to describe these athletes were expected. The way that Richardson was framed in certain newspapers proves that there is a focus on women athlete appearances. Based on the discussion of her hair, eyelashes, and nails it is clear that none of these things had to do with the scandal at hand. Griner was also described by her looks, but an opposite light as being a masculine presenting person. This does make me interested in analyzing more on how masculine presenting woman and feminine presenting woman are described by the media. This relates directly back to my literature review where I discussed the idea of a double bind and how woman our praised for being athletic however they may be shamed if they are too feminine looking or too masculine looking. This could be an interesting step to take in this research to dig deeper into why Richardson's flamboyant appearance was such a hot topic. Specifically, it would be interesting to research how the media represents women athletes of color who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, as Richardson and Griner both are a part of this community. A lot of the coverage from the media focused on Griner's wife and how she was feeling during the time that Brittney was in Russian prison. This made me wonder how that case would have been depicted by the media if Griner was a straight woman.

I do think that there's still should be a concern about the way that woman athletes are framed because it is clear that whether it's in drug scandal or just overall discussion, their athletic abilities are not the focus of conversation. We have seen this during the 2024 Women's NCAA basketball tournament with stars Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese. Clark is the white poster child for the WNBA now, and Reese was depicted as the "angry black woman". The discrepancy between the way that the media represented them was often based off their attitudes, rather than their skill set. They are both two elite athletes who deserve their success, however it is evident that women of color are depicted differently than white athletes. The constant hate on Angel Reese, due to her success is diminishing for women athletes. She has stated "I've been attacked so many times. Death threats, I've been sexualized, I've been threatened... I just want them to always just know, like, I'm still a human" (Woodroof, 2024). Reese reminds me a lot of Richardson because of her bold personality and I think the media hates her for it.

There is an overall concern of how Richardson, Davis-Woodhall, and Griner are going to be portrayed by the media in the 2024 Olympics after their scandals. This research could also potentially go further after the Olympics are complete and we can see how these women are framed as athletes since their scandals. Performing a framing analysis on these three scandals allowed me to get a deeper look into how female athletes are portrayed by the media during drug scandals. Some of these scandals were larger stages than others however, looking at this for three women athletes of color was a very eye-opening experience.

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