



Teaching about Female Sports Icons and Gender Equity

Megan Rapinoe in an international friendly against New Zealand at Nippert Stadium in Cincinnati, Ohio, September 19, 2017

(Jamie Smed via Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

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Teaching middle school students about women in sports opens the door to addressing gender equity issues such as the fight for equal pay in professional sports, a subject recently thrust into the spotlight by U.S. soccer star Megan Rapinoe following her team's 2019 World Cup victory. While some of the women included in this lesson are not well-known, their achievements paved the way for women who are now considered sports icons (Serena and Venus Williams, Lindsey Vonn, Gabby Douglas, and Simone Biles). For example, many people do not know about Lizzie Murphy, the first woman to play professional baseball. Her story is told in the picture book *Queen of the Diamond: The Lizzie Murphy Story*, a 2016 NCSS Notable Trade Book. Murphy, born in 1894, played professional baseball at a time when most

women did not play sports, and society judged negatively those who did. She advocated for receiving pay equal to her male counterparts, a struggle that continues for women to this day. While *Queen of the Diamond* is geared for younger children, middle level students can use it as a jumping off point for digging deeper into the history of female athletes and the ongoing struggle for recognition and equal rights.

Using picture books to introduce a topic is common in elementary classrooms; however, students of all ages can benefit

ON THE COVER: From top left clockwise: Olympic gymnast Simone Biles; Olympic swimmer Katie Ledecky (Both photos by Fernando Frazão/Agência Brasil/Wikimedia); Professional soccer player Megan Rapinoe (Photo: Jamie Smed/Wikimedia); Pro Golfer Michelle Wie (Photo Keith Allison/Wikimedia)

from exploring picture books.¹ In an article about using picture books to engage middle school students, Patricia Murphy explains several advantages. First, picture books are short enough to read in one class period. Second, they are pleasurable to look at. Third, the words are carefully chosen and can be used to model a specific writing technique. Finally, they are “reader-friendly” and enjoyable.² Additionally, Linda Webb Billman offers advice on how to integrate picture books in a middle level class. She recommends that teachers use picture books “in combination with open-ended activities that allow students to create individual or small-group projects” utilizing other skills.³ In the lesson described below, students use *Queen of the Diamond: The Lizzie Murphy Story* as a starting point to conduct an inquiry into female sports icons. They also have the opportunity to explore several other picture books. Finally, students are given the task of researching a female athlete and writing a newspaper article about her.

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework outlines four dimensions for implementing inquiry into social studies classrooms:

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

In Dimension One, students work to answer compelling and supporting questions about a topic. Questions can be developed by either students or teachers. In the lesson outlined below, the questions are teacher-created. In Dimension Two, solutions for the questions should come from multidisciplinary sources. In the example below, students focus on economics, civics, and history to answer compelling and supporting questions. Dimension Three addresses the use of both primary and secondary sources. In this lesson, students complete research looking for primary and secondary sources about a female sports icon. Dimension Four allows students to share their discoveries in a variety of ways. This lesson focuses on students creating newspaper articles about a female athlete and then creating a class newspaper to distribute school-wide.⁴

Beyond introducing students to female athletes they might not be aware of, this lesson is intended to explore gender disparity in sports. The gender pay gap, as mentioned, has received some attention of late with declarations made by American soccer player Megan Rapinoe. The Institute for Women’s Policy

Research and the Pew Research Center have also released important information on how little women earn compared to men in similar jobs. The gap is even greater for women of color.⁵ Introducing the concept of the gender pay gap through sports enables students to make connections via a job they are somewhat familiar with. An extension activity would be for students to research the gender pay gap in other fields.

The initial inquiry should take two days to complete, with two to four days allotted for research, based on the class’s needs.

Learning objectives:

- Compare perspectives of female athletes from the early 1900s to today
- Evaluate gender disparities in sports
- Research and identify evidence from multiple sources on the challenges faced by a female sports icon
- Write a newspaper article detailing the triumphs and challenges of a female athlete and outlining why this person should be considered a sports icon.
- Create a class newspaper devoted to female sports icons for schoolwide distribution.

Standards Connection: This lesson meets the following Iowa Core Social Studies Standards:

SS.6.21 Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed throughout different historical eras.

SS.6.5 With teacher direction, identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.

SS.6.8 With guided practice, construct responses to compelling questions supported by reasoning and evidence.

SS.6.9 Present original arguments based on credible sources using a variety of media to authentic audiences.

Lesson Introduction

Engage students’ interests by showing a clip from a recent interview with British men’s tennis star Andy Murray (see website resources on p. 5). In the clip, a reporter asks Murray his reaction about the first U.S. player having reached a grand slam semi-final in several years. Murray interrupts the reporter to say “male player,” indicating that the reporter had overlooked the women players who had won grand slam events during the same timeframe.

Next, facilitate a class discussion, asking students the following questions:



Serena Williams in a 2013 U.S. Open doubles match with Venus Williams on August 28, 2013. (Edwin Martinez via Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

- Who are some women who play professional sports?
- Do you know when women started playing professional sports?
- Can you name any women who played professional sports in the past?

Now introduce the concept of sports icons. To begin, ask students what “icon” means. Then ask what criteria we use to determine if an athlete is an icon. As a class, create a definition and list of criteria. Ask if they consider any of the female athletes they named to be “icons.” Ask students which male athletes they consider icons (possible responses: Michael Phelps, LeBron James, and Michael Jordan). Ask students if the criteria for considering a male or female athlete an icon are applied consistently. If not, what might be differences?

Next, teachers can either read *Queen of the Diamond* aloud to the class or have multiple copies available for students to read in groups. As they finish reading the book, hand out newspaper clippings from Lizzie Murphy’s career (see website resources on p. 5).

After reading the book and newspaper clippings, ask the following questions:

What made it difficult for Lizzie to play professional sports? How did she address difficult situations? Lizzie Murphy lived a long time ago. What challenges still remain for women who play professional sports?

Inquiry

After allowing time for discussion, introduce the compelling question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as

equal? Explain that students will be going to three stations to form an answer to the question. The three stations are: Billie Jean King; U.S. Women's National Soccer Team; and Picture Books. At each station, students will explore resources before answering the supporting question and creating a hypothesis for the compelling question. Graphic organizers for students to complete are included in the resources.

Station 1: Billie Jean King

Supporting Question: How were famous female athletes treated 45 years ago?

Students should start the station by reading the biography on Billie Jean King's website (see Handout A on p. 6). Also in this station is an article from a 1973 edition of the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* about King's win in "The Battle of the Sexes"; an NBC video from 2017 in which she talks about how she played for social change; and a 2013 video from ABC news about Billie Jean King. Students should complete the graphic organizer for this station.

Station 2: U.S. Women's National Soccer Team

Supporting Question: How are successful female teams today compensated compared to men's teams?

Students should start the station by reading the U.S. Olympic Committee's top 10 greatest moments from U.S. Women's Soccer (see Handout B on p. 7). Also, in this station are a PBS video about the complaint filed by the U.S. Women's Soccer with the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 2016, a 2019 NPR story (read the transcript or listen to the radio broadcast) about the team's 2019 lawsuit concerning equal pay, and a related article from the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Station 3: Picture Books

Supporting Question: Are there any little known historic female athletes who deserve icon status?

Students at this station will choose three picture books from the selection on page 8 about a variety of athletes from a variety of time periods. The list provided is not comprehensive. There are many other books that would fit into this station.

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Website Resources

Andy Murray video:

www.theguardian.com/sport/video/2017/jul/13/andy-murray-corrects-journalist-wimbledon-overlooking-female-video

Newspaper Clippings about Lizzie Murphy:

www.newspapers.com/clip/5243535/fitchburg_sentinel/

www.newspapers.com/clip/5243380/the_north_adams_transcript/

www.newspapers.com/clip/5243643/boston_post/

Billie Jean King:

Biography: www.billiejeanking.com/biography/

"Billie Jean Slam-Bams Riggs to Defeat," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Sept. 21, 1973), <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=ZdpaAAAIBAJ&sjid=AG0DAAAIBAJ&pg=4926%2C2841464>

NBC News video: www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=MyMtOwwtJW0

ABC News video: www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=MyMtOwwtJW0

U.S. Women's National Soccer Team:

Top 10 Moments: www.teamusa.org/News/2018/July/10/10-Moments-That-Defined-The-US-Womens-Soccer-Team

PBS NewsHour Video: www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily-videos/u-s-womens-soccer-players-demand-equal-pay-for-equal-play/

San Francisco Chronicle article: www.sfchronicle.com/sports/annkillion/article/Why-does-the-U-S-Women-s-Soccer-team-get-paid-13689380.php

NPR interview about 2019 lawsuit: www.npr.org/2019/03/10/702077204/u-s-womens-soccer-gender-discrimination-lawsuit

Station 1: Billie Jean King

In this station, start by reading the biography of Billie Jean King (www.billiejeanking.com/biography/). Then explore the other three sources on page 5 and take notes. Next, answer the supporting question, using what you learned at this station. Finally, attempt an answer to the compelling question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as equal?

Source	Questions to think about	Notes to help answer the supporting and compelling questions
1973 article from the <i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	What happened in 1973? Why was Billie Jean King's victory important?	
ABC News video from 2013	What does it mean to win for social change? Why would Billie Jean King describe her victory in those words?	
NBC News video from 2017	How were Billie's experiences different from Lizzie Murphy's?	

Compelling Question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as equal?

Supporting Question: How were famous female athletes treated 45 years ago?

Station 2: U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team

In this station, start by reading the U.S. Olympic Committee’s top 10 moments from U.S. Women’s Soccer Team (www.teamusa.org/News/2018/July/10/10-Moments-That-Defined-The-US-Womens-Soccer-Team). Then explore the other three sources on page 5 and take notes. Next, answer the supporting question, using what you learned at this station. Finally, attempt an answer to the compelling question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as equal?

Source	Questions to think about	Notes to help answer the supporting and compelling questions
PBS Newshour Video from 2016	What is a pay gap? How has the treatment of the women’s team changed since the late 1990s?	
NPR Interview from 2019	Why are members of the Women’s U.S. National Team suing? How do their experiences compare with Lizzie Murphy’s?	
<i>San Francisco Chronicle Article</i>	What are the differing arguments between the U.S. Women’s players and the U.S. Soccer Federation?	

Compelling Question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as equal?

Supporting Question: How are successful female teams compensated compared to men’s teams?

Picture Books about Female Athletes*

Title	Author/Illustrator	Publication Year	Description
<i>Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World's Fastest Woman</i>	Kathleen Krull Illustrator: David Diaz	1996	Wilma Rudolph was the first American woman to win 3 Olympic gold medals.
<i>America's Champion Swimmer: Gertrude Ederle</i>	David A. Adler Illustrator: Terry Widener	2000	Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim across the English Channel. 
<i>Nothing But Trouble: The Story of Althea Gibson</i>	Sue Stauffacher Illustrator: Greg Couch	2007	Althea Gibson was the first African American to compete and win in Wimbledon.
<i>Playing to Win: The Story of Althea Gibson</i>	Karen Deans Illustrator: Elbrite Brown	2007	
<i>Touch the Sky: Alice Coachman, Olympic High Jumper</i>	Ann Malaspina Illustrator: Eric Valasquez	2012	Alice Coachman was the first black woman to win an Olympic gold medal. 
<i>Queen of the Track: Alice Coachman Olympic High Jump Champ</i>	Heather Lang Illustrator: Floyd Cooper	2012	
<i>Nadia: The Girl Who Couldn't Sit Still</i>	Karlin Gray Illustrator: Christine Davenier	2016	Nadia Comaneci was the first woman to earn a perfect 10 in gymnastics.
<i>Long-Armed Ludy and the First Women's Olympics</i>	Jean L.S. Patrick Illustrator: Adam Gustavson	2017	Lucile Ellerbe Godbold won gold at the 1922 Women's Olympic Games. Women were not allowed to compete in track and field events in the regular Olympics.

* This is not a comprehensive list. Other picture books can be used instead or in addition to these.

Station 3: Picture Books

In this station, choose three picture books about female athletes throughout history and take notes. Next, answer the supporting question, using what you learned at this station. Finally, attempt an answer to the compelling question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as equal?

Source	Questions to think about	Notes to help answer the supporting and compelling questions
Book 1 Title:	What sport did this person play? When did she play it? What challenges did she have to overcome? Have you heard of this person before? Why do you think you have or have not heard of her?	
Book 2 Title:	What sport did this person play? When did she play it? What challenges did she have to overcome? Have you heard of this person before? Why do you think you have or have not heard of her?	
Book 3 Title:	What sport did this person play? When did she play it? What challenges did she have to overcome? Have you heard of this person before? Why do you think you have or have not heard of them?	

Compelling Question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as equal?

Supporting Question: Who are other historic female athletes and how were they treated?

Research Directions

You and your partner will choose a female sports icon to research and write a newspaper article about. Use this sheet to keep track of your research.

1. Name of the person you are researching: _____

2. Find at least two biographies about the person

a. Title of biography 1 _____

b. Author _____

c. Copyright year _____

d. Publisher _____

e. Notes from biography 1

a. Title of biography 2 _____

b. Author _____

c. Copyright year _____

d. Publisher _____

e. Notes from biography 2

3. Find at least three newspaper articles about the person

a. Title of article 1 _____

b. Author _____

c. Title of newspaper _____

d. Date of newspaper _____

e. Notes from article 1:

a. Title of article 2 _____

b. Author _____

c. Title of newspaper _____

d. Date of newspaper _____

e. Notes from article 2

a. Title of article 3 _____

b. Author _____

c. Title of newspaper _____

d. Date of newspaper _____

e. Notes from article 3:

4. If available, find 1–2 videos about your sports icon.

a. Link to video: _____

b. Notes from video: _____

Newspaper Directions

Write a newspaper article about your chosen female athlete. Your article should include:

1. Leading Headline

- a. Create a title that hooks readers
- b. Make sure your headline font is a larger point size than that of the body of your article

2. Introductory Paragraph

- a. Use this paragraph to draw your readers in
- b. Include an interesting story or information about your athlete

3. Body Paragraphs

- a. Write 3–5 paragraphs that include information about your athlete’s early life, greatest achievements, and later life (if applicable).
- b. Use the information that you learned from your research

4. Conclusion

- a. Summarize your article
- b. Include an argument for why this person should be considered an icon
- c. Be creative!

Make sure you proofread and that your information is accurate! You may use direct quotes from your chosen athlete. Remember we are creating an entire newspaper issue with these articles.

Rubric for Newspaper Article

- The article includes relevant and accurate facts.
- The article is written in journalistic style and language.
- The article is grounded in the research students completed about the sports icon.
- The article includes an argument as to why this person should be considered a sports icon.
- The format includes title, lead, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion.
- Conventions and editing are excellent.

TEACHING ABOUT FEMALE SPORTS ICONS AND GENDER EQUITY *from page 5*

After students complete each station, bring the class together to discuss the compelling question: Will female and male athletes ever be treated as equal? Lead a discussion about the stations and ask: Of the contemporary or historic women you've learned about, do you feel they have gotten as much recognition as male athletes? If not, why do you think that is? What difficulties, if any, did these athletes face while becoming professional athletes? Do you think any of the athletes you just learned about should be considered sports icons? Why or why not?

Communicating Conclusions

Invite students to choose a historical or contemporary female sports icon to research. Students will read biographies and newspaper articles and will watch videos of the athlete, if available (see Handout D). After researching their athlete, students will write a newspaper article. They will need to include biographical information, highlights of the athlete's career, and some information the student found interesting. Students may also include direct quotes from their chosen athlete (see Handout E). Additionally, they need to include an argument as to why this athlete should be considered an icon. Finally, as a class, students will compile all of their articles into a "Special Issue" newspaper highlighting women who may not be recognized as sports icons to be distributed around the school.

Possible Extension and Differentiation Activities

A main reason why female sports participation grew over the last few decades is because of the passage of Title IX in 1972. While the primary focus of this lesson is about the ongoing struggle for pay equity of female athletes, many students might wonder about the history of women fighting for the chance to play. If teachers are interested in this aspect, they can include the book *Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX: The Law that Changed the Future of Girls in America*, by Karen Blumenthal, and the video *Title IX at 40*, produced by the White House in 2012 to mark the 40th anniversary of the law banning discrimination on the basis of sex in any educational program or activity that receives federal funding: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Jqj40dybSQ.

Students can also create a fictional story about their athlete or they can turn their newspaper article into a video/podcast/

vlog. Another possible extension activity would be for students to choose a profession they are interested in (acting, medicine, etc.) and research the pay inequities in that profession. Students would need to report on whether pay inequity exists and possible solutions to fix pay inequity in that profession.

To differentiate for English Language Learners, the teacher could provide books about female sports icons in the students' first languages (if available) to assist with the picture book station. In addition, research of more recent icons can be completed through interviews and videos. 🌐

Notes

1. See also Linda Webb Billman, "Aren't These Books for Little Kids?" *Educational Leadership* 60, no. 3 (November, 2002): 48–51; Cyndi Giorgis, "The Power of Reading Picture Books Aloud to Secondary Students," *The Clearing House* 73, no. 1. (1999): 51–53. Cyndi Giorgis and Kimberly J. Hartman, "Using Picture Books to Support Middle School Curricula," *Middle School Journal* 31, no. 4 (2000): 34–41; Patricia Murphy, "Using Picture Books to Engage Middle School Studies," *Middle School Journal* 40, no. 4 (2009): 20–24.
2. Murphy. "Using Picture Books to Engage Middle School Studies," 21.
3. Billman. "Aren't These Books for Little Kids?," 51.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013).
5. Institute for Women's Policy Research, "Pay Equity and Discrimination," <https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/pay-equity-discrimination/>; Another useful resource is: The Pew Research Center, The Narrowing, But Persistent, Gender Gap in Pay, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/22/gender-pay-gap-facts/.

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