

Dunking On STEREOTYPES

From record breaking moments to future franchises, women's basketball is soaring to new heights with rising stars like Caitlin Clark and Sabrina Ionescu transforming the game.

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Over 9.9 million people tuned in to watch the 2023 NCAA March Madness Championship game. The hype leading up to the game was immense as two talented teams with entertaining styles of play faced off.

The Final Four, the two games preceding the National Championship, featured an average of 6.5 million viewers.

Both of these major

numbers are huge increases compared to viewership from years prior. What the casual fan may not realize is these numbers are for the NCAA women's March Madness tournament, not the men's.

These large numbers in viewership are a testament to the increasing popularity for women's basketball in recent years. In fact, just 15 years ago the women's National Championship game between the University of Connecticut and Louisville collected just 2.67 million viewers, 30% of what we saw this past year.

Evelyn Zhang, a senior at Paly

who has played basketball since she was little, notes that this may be a result of changing attitudes towards the sport.

"People have always had a misconception about women's sports," she said. "They are more team-based, there's more team-based plays and passing and everything. But people thought that women's sports just aren't worth watching [because] they're not as athletic or

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-Evelyn Zhang '24

they're not as interesting because they're not as flashy. But I think people have come to realize that that's not the only objective with the sport of basketball."

While women's college basketball developed less than a year after men's college basketball (back in 1892), it took much longer for women's basketball to become a developed professional sport, in part due to the pervasive attitudes that Zhang discussed.

The NBA was founded in 1946, but it took half a century more for the WNBA to be developed in 1996. Just like the NBA, the WNBA was making strides to do new things.

The very first WNBA game (New York Liberty versus Los Angeles Sparks in 1997) had a crowd of just over 14,000 people watching. The recent NCAA game that broke the ESPN record had more than 700 times that amount.

Sheryl Swoopes was the first player signed to a WNBA team in 1997 and throughout her career won 3 MVP awards. Along with Swoopes, many other women like Lisa Leslie - who is a four-time Olympic gold medal winner - and Val Ackerman - who became the first president of the WNBA - have made steps towards helping the WNBA thrive. There are many women who want to make the WNBA big and are putting in the work because basketball is the sport they love.

Recently, the hype and energy surrounding women's basketball, at both the collegiate and professional levels, has skyrocketed. This is mainly in part because of more media coverage, for both watching the games and on social media.

Through this coverage, athletes such as Sabrina Ionescu, Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese, and many more have made names for themselves through their stellar on-the-court play and off-the-court appearances.

Zhang notes that the power of social media is often harnessed to support these athletes.

"[Women's basketball] is just getting more attention," she said. "I think [it's] due to social media, and how it's so easy for moments to go viral."

So you know, like with Caitlin Clark, she was doing so great, even in her freshman year, but she didn't really go viral until you know, the end of her third year."

Another Paly student, sophomore and basketball player June Tau, has loved watching women's basketball since she was little and recognizes the increase in popularity and media coverage.

"I honestly see a great improvement within the women's college basketball media coverage," Tau said.

"I think that the media is slowly starting to realize that college women's [basketball] is interesting."

June Tau '26

"I think that the media is slowly starting to realize that college women's is interesting. Also when big media stars such as actors, singers, and even male basketball players show their support to young college women athletes the media definitely covers it a lot."

Laney Amundsen, a women's basketball player for Cal State Northridge, addresses how the media and coverage of women's basketball has changed from a player perspective.

"From a players perspective media coverage of women's college basketball in years past, hasn't been great," she said. "Even thinking back to the NCAA tournament during COVID-19, the women's side had little to no funding compared to the men's side."

Amundsen adds how the media recently, specifically this past season, has taken a massive surge.

"I will say that within the past year it's been amazing to see the light being shed on women's college basketball," she said. "There are so many talented women out there that are finally getting the attention they deserve, so I hope it continues."

A primary example of the surge in media coverage is Sabrina Ionescu, a WNBA All-Star for the New York Liberty. She became a household name after breaking the record for most points scored in a three-point contest, between both the NBA and WNBA. At the 2023 WNBA All-Star Weekend, Ionescu totaled 37 points out of the 40 points available, and she knocked down a staggering 25 out of her 27 three-point shot attempts.

After this incredible performance, there was massive debate surrounding who the greatest shooter in the world is: Sabrina Ionescu or Stephen Curry? Amidst the debate, Ionescu challenged Curry to a shootout, and from the men's three points line, no less. Curry accepted





I o - nescu 29-26 - garnered 5.4 million average viewers and was the most-watched NBA All-Star Saturday night in four years. But outside of the ratings, the event brought massive attention to the NBA, WNBA, and women's inclusivity as a whole, along with raising thousands of dollars for charity. Many young fans watching the sport idolize both Ionescu and Curry and the NBA plans to continue these kinds of events in the future.

Ionescu recognized the event as an opportunity not only to advance her own career, but also to increase visibility for the talent present in the WNBA as well.

"Knowing that I had the opportunity to kind of pick what line I wanted to shoot from, it was a no-brainer," Ionescu told reporters. "[I want to] continue to prove that we're capable and willing. Wanted to continue to equal the playing field and doing so on the biggest stage."

Tau acknowledges the much-deserved attention that the event brought to women's sports.

"I watched Steph vs Sabrina and really enjoyed it," she said. "I think that the NBA should continue incorporating the WNBA into their all-star weekend just because the WNBA doesn't receive nearly as much attention as the NBA for many reasons but it was nice to see one of the greatest female shooters compete against the greatest male shooter. It also was nice to see Sabrina get the recognition she deserves since she still does hold the three point contest record for both NBA and WNBA."

Paly senior and basketball player Kara Vetter notes one reason why this was

such a big moment for Ionescu and women's basketball.

"A lot of the reason that [Ionescu] is getting more attention is because she's getting interactions with big male basketball names," Vetter said. "I don't know how common that is, but I definitely think that is a pattern."

Though some believe that it's negative that female athletes sometimes need bigger (usually male) basketball players to help give them a larger platform, Vetter thinks that this is an overwhelmingly positive scenario.

"You can see how Steph supports women's basketball," she said. "He takes a lot of opportunities to shout out women players. I think that's a great move for NBA players to be doing because they [the female players] can have sponsorships, like [Stanford player] Cameron Brink has a sponsorship with New Balance and she's getting a lot of attention. And they're able to monetize more. So appearing in commercials with all these NBA stars is really positive."

Steph Curry is one of many NBA players who are pushing for change in the gender inequality problem within sports. Curry helps players from the WNBA receive their deserved recognition.

Caitlin Clark is another prominent figure in the women's basketball scene. Clark, a senior at the University of Iowa, is known for her difficult shot-making ability and deep three-point range. As a result, she is one of the most prolific scorers in college basketball history.

In fact, on February 15, 2024, in a game against Michigan, Clark dropped a career-high 49 points, making her career total 3,569. This number made her the highest-scoring player in women's college basketball history, beating Kelsey Plum's previous record of 3,527.

However, Clark was not done yet, as on March 3, Clark brought her total up to 3,685 points, becoming the highest scorer in NCAA basketball history, both men's and women's, surpassing the previous record of 3,667 points set by Pete Maravich between 1967-70.

Clark's recent surge of record-breaking has brought massive attention to her and women's basketball, with athletes across the country giving her props and congratulating her for her success. The game in which she achieved her record collected over 4 million peak viewers and was the most-watched regular season women's college basketball game since 1999. Numerous celebrities, including Travis Scott, were present at the game. Follow-

ing the match, Scott enthusiastically took photos with Clark and the entire team. The influx of social media posts from NBA icons like LeBron James has amplified the event's significance, creating widespread attention and boosting its popularity to new heights.

Paly senior Neel Sharma addresses how he got interested in women's basketball primarily through Clark's record-breaking surge.

"I [started watching] mainly because of the uprising of Caitlin Clark," Sharma said. "She made it a situation where more people knew about women's college basketball than men's, and made it really relevant."

Ever since Caitlin Clark announced she would be declaring for the 2025 WNBA draft, ticket prices for the Indiana Fever (the team with first pick, who are reportedly planning to select her) have surged. As they hold the important number one pick in the draft, it has undoubtedly increased anticipation amongst Fever and WNBA fans. Currently, the average price of an Indiana Fever ticket stands at \$140, which is a remarkable increase of 133% from last year's average of \$60.

Along with the overall ticket price increase in the WNBA recently, the league has become more popular, selling out more games than ever before and generating the most revenue in the league's history. As a result, WNBA commissioner Cathy Engelbert said the league was eyeing a short list of 10 cities for new teams and hoping to add multiple franchises by 2025.

The WNBA, which only has 12 teams in the league currently, is looking to expand the league for the first time since the Atlanta Dream were added in 2008. One of these cities which may get a new WNBA team is San Francisco, with a new team coming to join the Golden State Warriors in the Chase Center in 2025.

According to Golden State chairman Joe Lacob, the team will likely be known as "the Golden State," a name that closely ties it to their owner team, the Golden State Warriors. This is a move that is applauded by many fans who recognize the benefits of linking the two teams.

In English soccer, big club teams like Arsenal, Tottenham, Manchester City, and many more have both mens and womens teams under the same club banner, which helps increase the amount of womens fans since they share jerseys, cheers and general culture with their highly-watched male counterparts. In the case of the new San Francisco WNBA team, their close link to the Warriors might help increase the hype for the new team by easily drawing Warriors fans.

Vetter notes that the Stanford team's popularity will also create excitement for the new W N B A team. The Cardinals won their final regular season conference championship (before the Pac-12 dissolves next year) and are heading into the NCAA championships with their eyes on the gold. Their coach, Tara VanDerveer recently broke the record of having the most wins in college basketball history with 1,203 wins, beating the record previously held by former Duke men's coach Mike Krzyzewski.

"They realize that a lot of players are getting so much attention," Vetter said. "It's just a good step forward, and I think they're trying to capitalize on that [attention] and just also expand viewership, because the Bay Area has a big women's basketball fan base thanks to Stanford."

Zhang is hoping that the surge in popularity for NCAA women's basketball will

lead to an increase in viewership for the WNBA as well.

"Right now college basketball is getting super popular, but the WNBA is still kind of behind the viewership," she said. "Some people argue it's because the WNBA doesn't rake in as much money, and they're not able to pay as much. But once we see big stars coming in, it's just a matter of time."

Amundsen adds how the recognition of college stars will help the WNBA as they make their transition from college to professional basketball.

"I would hope people continue to follow them as they take their next step to the WNBA," Amundsen said. "This would grow the number of viewers for the WNBA."

The growth of women's basketball does not look like it is stopping anytime soon, as there are many rising stars across both the collegiate and professional level, and the hype and coverage of the sport will continue to see an increase as well, especially as female stars gain more recognition. Soon, we could see the WNBA grow even more and hope to add more teams, eventually expanding to be as big as the NBA's 30 teams.

The movement in women's basketball has allowed for women's inclusivity and growth. Women's basketball is leading the way for other women's sports to follow in its footsteps, further growing the foundation for women's athletics to become as popular and respected as their male counterparts.

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CSUN basketball player Laney Amundsen