

# Hanze Hogeschool Groningen

SPORT & ETHICS

Kaelin Staats | S367254 | 17-01-2021

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## Introduction

Commissioned by the Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen, for the subject of sports & ethics, I wrote an essay about an ethical dilemma. In this essay I will explain the unequal payment in top sport between male and female athletes. I also conducted an interview with Hardy Menkehorst for this essay. A well-known sports psychologist in the world of sports. The interview can be found in the appendix.

## Essay

### Fair fight for equal payment?

More equal payment between male and female athletes. Can you imagine this? In general the fact is that female athletes get paid less than male athletes. When we look at the year list of 2019 of Forbes of the top-100 best paid athletes, we can only find 2 female athletes at that list. And when we look at an recent example of the income of Lieke Martens (best football player in the world in 2017) in relation to the income of Lionel Messi (best football player in the world in 2017), you will find that where Martens has worked the whole year of 2017 for, Messi earned within one day (Bosgraaf, n.d.). Fair or unfair? And okay, I know that when we talk about Messi we are now talking about one of the greatest footballers in the world. But when we look at the bigger picture, you can ask yourself where this difference in payment came from and is this ethical right? The gap is so big in some sports, that we should look at the part why this gap is so immense big and what the positive can be if we would make the payment more equal. The gap in payment is already getting smaller, but we are still not there yet. In this way I want to say that woman should be paid more equally in relation to man. I know it's a tough issue and that it can't been resolved within now and a few years, but I think that it is ethical right to look into this dilemma, look at what is already done and point out why woman should be paid more equally in relation to man.

### Sexism and sports

First of all, we need to look at the level of sexism in the Netherlands to better understand where it comes from to increase the chances of equal opportunities for women in the sports world. The difference between sportsmen and sportswomen is deeply rooted. This can also be inferred from the words of the founder of the Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin finds women's sport 'unethical, inappropriate, impractical and uninteresting' (Milou, 2019). As it now seems in the world, women must first achieve a high performance before they can even claim a higher financial compensation. Take for example the KNVB, which after so many years will finally equalize the payment between the men's and women's teams by 2023, partly due to the attention that the women's team has been able to obtain by winning important tournaments (NOS Voetbal, 2019). When Vivianne Miedema, after winning the European Championship in 2017, indicated in an interview with the Guardian that she would think it fair if the men's team and women's team were paid equally because half of the female selection could hardly finance their lives, their sparked a big discussion in the Netherlands (Steinberg, 2017). So there is also income inequality in the Netherlands. Where a male athlete can often live well from their incomes out of sports, many female athletes have a forced job next to their sports career in order to generate income.

That sexism is still at a high level in the Netherlands is evident from the reaction of Johan Derksen during Voetbal International by saying: "Women's football is not a shit. Those girls are running wild" (Wetering, 2017). This sexism does not only affect the teams themselves, but also among the unions where the majority of the administrative positions are filled by men. During my interview with Hardy Menkehorst, I asked him whether this difference in the positions makes any difference to the subject. His answer was "I definitely think you should have at least equal numbers in the board. I do think that the position of woman will then be more visible." He took the Dutch Volleyball Association as an example, a sport that mainly women play in the Netherlands, but where the board consists largely of men. Another example is that in European sport

foundations 14% of all decision-making positions are occupied by woman (EIGE, 2017). Sexism in sports is so deeply rooted that it has undoubtedly affected women's payment in sports.

### **International inequality**

One of the other factors showing that women earn much less compared to men becomes very clear when we consider the international difference in pay. The difference in payment between female athletes and male athletes reappears every year as Forbes releases their annual list of the top 100 highest paid athletes (Abrams, 2019). It is always full of male athletes, but where are the women? The only woman who has been able to defend the woman in recent years is tennis star Serena Williams. She was on the list in 2017, but after her pregnancy she disappeared the following year. And there are not only differences between individual athletes. For example, look at an article from the BBC about the American men's football team and the American women's football team. The US women's team has now won the World Cup three times in a row and the US men's team actually has not achieved anything. But if the US men's team were to win the World Cup in 2019, each player would be paid \$1.1 million in contrast to the women's, who would be paid \$261,000 per player for winning the World Cup (BBC, 2019). Almost 4 times less than a male player. As Hardy Menkehorst said so beautifully in my interview with him: "The gap could really be narrower. If we were to half the gap, it would make a huge difference".

### **Supply and demand?**

One of the biggest factors where the unfair odds start is the fewer chances for female athletes to negotiate with endorsement deals. Top male athletes earn way more due to better sponsorship and endorsement deals (Perasso, 2017). Research from Play the game shows that sponsors are more attracted by male athletes as male athletes tend to be more marketable (Toft, 2011). These imbalance of endorsement and sponsor deals expands the income gap between male and female athletes. Then the question remains, where does this come from and what can we do about it? The logic why women get paid less for sponsor deals lies in the economy behind the sport. How well a particular sport is viewed, determines to a large extent the commercial value of a sport because the media producers hope to reach the largest possible audience in order to make as much profit as possible. In general, women athletes and teams simply have fewer visitors compared to the men's athletes and teams, which shows that women sell fewer visitor tickets and therefore less income.

It seems like a vicious circle, if women were to receive more publicity and media attention, the viewing figures would automatically go up and therefore more sponsorship and advertising money would come in. In addition, if more money becomes available, women don't specific needs jobs outside their work and they will have more time to train, to professionalize and thus can also deliver a better quality of competitions. Which is more interesting for visitors and the media. But how do we do this when women are still paid less and people may not be open to it? Sports sociologist Agnes Elling, who has done a lot of research into sex inequality in sports, calls it partly a matter of getting used to (Bosgraaf, n.d.). "When you start following a sport, it usually becomes interesting. Media play an important role in this. "

In addition, there is also a difference in what the media shows to us. 'The media portrayal of female athletes tends to be less professional, and sometimes involve entertaining or sexualized contents instead of portraying their athletic abilities' (Lamoureux, 2012). Various studies by the University of Cambridge and an American professor in Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, show that the commentary on men's sports differs significantly from the way women's sports are reported. For

example, at the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil, sportsmen were three times more likely to be the subject of the media than sportswomen. And that while 45% of the participants were women that year. When it comes to men, words like 'strong', 'fantastic', 'win' and 'fight' are used. Women's sports often go hand in hand with completely different words: 'married', 'unmarried', 'trying', 'participating' (Bosgraaf, n.d.).

And if women really do it better in a certain sports, bring up more money and attract more audience, certain unions still do not think it worth paying them more equally. Just look at the example above about the US women's team. In the time we live in now, that is simply no longer possible, and these women must get the equality they deserve.

### **It's getting better**

But it is not all negative. If we take a good look at the subject and compare a few years ago with now, we can see that the difference is getting smaller and that more and more attention is being paid to it, and that is positive. Several studies by the BBC indicate that there is indeed a change in the payout. In 2017 there was still inequality in payment in 17% of the sports, compared to 30% in 2014 (BBC, 2017). It has to be, because there comes more light on the matter. Nowadays this is no longer only from the point of view of female athletes but also from the sponsors themselves. An example of this is the Dutch top hockey. Hockey is one of the team sports in which the level of the men's and women's teams is almost equal, but the female players in the Dutch Hoofdklasse often earn five to ten times less in relation to the male players. And that is precisely what one of the biggest sponsors in hockey wants to counter. As a sponsor of 53 hockey clubs in the Netherlands, ABN AMRO wants to enforce emancipation in terms of remuneration. Any hockey club who does not go along with this idea, to be realized by 2025, will not receive a new sponsor contract ' (Volkers, 2020). One of the points that Ernst Broekhorst mentions in conversation with the KNHB is that they 'want to be an organization where all groups in society feel seen and heard, regardless of origin, religion, sexual preference, generation, race or sex' (Wester, 2020).

The fact that a major national sponsor now speaks so clearly on this topic shows the need for change, and that this is positive is something that Hardy Menkehorst shares with me. "I do think it is a good position from sponsors to indicate how important they find the topic and as an incentive I think it is fantastic." But there are not only changes nationally, but also internationally. Take tennis, for example, where, following the protests of tennis legend Billy Yean King about equal pay in tennis, the US Open decided to pay the same prize money for both men and women in 1973 (Bosgraaf, n.d.). That this has a positive effect is shown again by the Forbes top-100 list, where the only women on that list are tennis players (Abrams, 2019). This shows that it is really possible for woman to be paid more equal in relation to man.

### **The solutions?**

The fact that top sport is still under influence of sexism and unequal media attention between men and women is evident from the unequal payment. Because is it really fair that a woman gets paid less because they are a little less strong, less muscular and less fast? That says nothing about the attractiveness of women's sports and that it is fair to let the gap be that huge. This is of course a difficult discussion, which will always persist and where everyone can form a different opinion on. But as long as we accept that, we will never get any further and will get stuck where we are now.

Fortunately, this does not stop women and in the recent years it is getting better with the women's sport. In the financial field and in the field of media attention in the Netherlands, for example. After winning the European Championship in 2017, more

and more girls have started playing football, the Dutch lionesses will be paid equal to the men from 2023 and this is just an example. But this does require something.

In order to get woman paid more equally in relation to man, I think we must continue with the positive developments that are already being made, try to narrow the gap and accept that there isn't a one day solution. One of these long lasting solutions is making sure that the boards of the different associations consist of equal numbers of man and woman's in decision making positions. The other long lasting solution is make sure female athletes get more media attention, in order to provide more sponsorship deals and incomes, but also the other around. When boards decide to divide the sponsorship incomes more equally, women don't specific needs jobs outside their work and they will have more time to train, to professionalize and thus can also deliver a better quality of competitions. Let's say, the vicious circle must first be broken in order to get the ball rolling.

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## Appendix

### **Interview Hardy Menkehorst Ethical Dillema**

For the course sport & ethics I was commissioned to write an essay about an ethical dilemma in sport. I chose the subject of 'unequal payment in top sport between men and women'. Think of the difference in payment between Lieke Martens (best football player in the world 2017) and Lionel Messi (best football player in the world 2017) where Messi had earned the entire salary of Lieke Martens of a whole year in one day. Of course we're talking about Messi, one of the greatest footballers of all time, but the purpose of my essay is to look at the difference between men and women in all of elite sport. Where does that difference come from? What has changed over the years? How are we doing now and what can we do better.

#### ***To start, can you briefly introduce yourself?***

I am Hardy Menkehorst. I have been a sports psychologist since 1986 and I work with Dutch top athletes and also with all kinds of talents who have been selected for the Olympic Games for a number of years now. We also call this people who sit in front of the podium for 8 years. And I work with that, mainly in Heerenveen where we currently work with 150/160 people. In addition to regular top athletes, one of my other specialties is guiding all people who stop practicing top sport. Of course, that will happen a lot after the Olympic Games in Tokyo.

#### ***Have you ever been in contact with this topic yourself?***

No, of course about the subject in sports, but as a psychologist I'm not about the finances. Of course I know that there is a big difference between soccer players and soccer players and that the gap is getting smaller, but there is still a big difference. But now there are several football players who can live reasonably, and also save a little, from what they earn abroad. In the Netherlands it is still 50/50, one half gets paid for it and has a contract, the other half still does it on an amateur basis.

#### ***In the Netherlands there are many clubs in the 'Eredivisie' but do not have a team for the women. We're talking about football now, of course, but if we're going to watch skating or swimming, what do you think the possibilities are there?***

Well look, it is of course the case with skating, and I also think that there are differences in pay and I am sure of that. But now it is closing very quickly there. As an example, look at Jutta Leerdam, on board of a skating team. I don't think she is driving around for 50 mil (thousand), that's really a bit more. But the time of real big sponsors is of course also a little over in skating. I don't know exactly how that works at Jumbo-Visma, and how people pay there, but very often they look at what you have already achieved as an athlete and if we approach it that way, Ireen Wüst should actually earn the most.

#### ***So you think that whoever gets the best results should also be paid the best?***

Hell yes.

***But do you think, for example, with a Jumbo-Visma, which in turn has several sponsors, that the sponsor income should also be divided equally or that it should also be paid out here as a result of performances?***

Well, I would actually be in favor if you want to solve this, that there is a basic amount that you all share with each other and which can be quite high. And then you would, based on performance, see if you can increase that amount again. And then I would consider the premise that everyone deserves an equal basic amount. For example 75% of your income, and that you can earn the last 25% by achieving good results. And if you really want to do it ethically, then you have to connect the results, for example in skating, with improving a personal record and not whether you become world champion or not.

***We are now of course talking about top sport and in top sport more and more women are featured. What do you think about sexism in top sport and how women are approached when they become pregnant, for example?***

In fact, and coincidentally I was talking to a sports star about it last week, it was once said in the Eastern Bloc, it's probably not true, but when women are pregnant they have different hormone levels and should be able to perform better. Of course, this is possible up to about four months of the pregnancy, after which it becomes very difficult. Also indicate what kind of sport you practice, for example swimming might be longer than skating. There is not much scientific evidence for this, but on the other hand if you as a woman have a fetus in you that you have more blood in your body and therefore more oxygen, so to speak. But more energy that has to be spent on the fruit. I also think that more and more top athletes can come back after a pregnancy through good personal guidance, for example look at tennis. This is where a larger number of mothers have come back and they have, and I don't know if that is aware, that sometimes being a mother is also a new discovery for athletes and they prefer being a mother rather than coming back in the top sport, but it must be possible for women to be physically able to come back. You often cannot say that in advance, but it must be possible for women to be physically able to come back.

***If we're going to look at sexism, and take a look at the board of different unions. Should that change to a better gender distribution, in order to better address unequal pay?***

Hands down, I definitely think you should have at least equal numbers and you could even look at if there are any typical sports that a lot of girls and women participate in. That you adapt the board to the male / female division in the sport itself. Look at volleyball, for example, in comparison there are very few men on volleyball in contrast to the board. And actually the board should be a reflection, or at least strive for it.

***Do you think this can address and improve the problem of unequal pay?***

I do think that the position of women will then be more visible. And that if people from the union had to decide, it seems to me that it will be facilitated sooner if more women are on the board of such a union.

***Indeed I think that would be a good addition. If I take a little example with Billy Jean King, do you know her?***

Hell yes.

***Do you know what she earned by taking first place in doubles at Wimbledon 1961?***

Oh good question. What shall I gamble ... Doubles women? I think around £ 5000? But I am probably very wrong haha.

***That's right haha. Billy Jean King won a Harrods voucher for the first place in doubles at Wimbledon 1961.***

Yes that is really shocking.

***And if you are going to look at different sports, do you think that there should be equality between the sports, how we are going to approach this globally or do you think we should approach it within each branch of sport?***

Difficult question. You see, the rewards are always linked to sponsors and the sponsors love sports that can be broadcast a lot and easily. I once worked in underwater hockey myself, and I really don't know how you want those people to advertise and that you also get it visible. Swimming is also an example. Advertising is often not allowed on the bathing suit, which means that only the bathing cap remains. This would require funding flows for larger-scale sponsorships, but that is very difficult to approach. You could also say well, and that is also a bit for NOS \* NSF, all sports are equal and all receive a stipend and a top sport status. It does not necessarily matter whether you have already achieved a lot or little, you just have to belong to the top of the world, but everything is already equal there. Unions could, for example, continue this, but I don't know if it is feasible because they are completely different flows. For example, hockey players earn a little amount of money, but baseball players almost nothing at all in the Netherlands.

***That was actually the next question I wanted to ask you haha, are you familiar with ABN AMRO and their sponsorship deals at various hockey clubs?***

Hell yes.

***And also with the interview they recently gave?***

No, not yet. Tell.

***A few months ago, ABN AMRO imposed on the hockey clubs to distribute the distribution of the sponsorship money equally between men and women within a year. If the hockey clubs fail, ABN AMRO will stop sponsoring these clubs and the contracts will not be extended. So the clubs actually have a problem. Do you think this is a good way to approach and solve the problem?***

You have really tough questions haha. I do think it is a good position from, ABN AMRO in this case, sponsors to indicate how important they find the topic and as an incentive I think it is fantastic. As awareness of hey, you have differences and why do you want to keep it that way, I think it's good too. Whether you have to put the pressure on it to possibly take away all the money that is disadvantageous to you and to the men and women, I am not sure whether that is a good approach. But I like how they approach it.

***The distribution is currently roughly 70% for men and 30% for women. And if we then look at the audience of men and women, there are also differences between them. But it is not, for example, that women are viewed less in hockey than men. That has been an example of one of the positions for ABN AMRO, we sponsor you, but it is not the intention that 70% of the income goes to the men and only 30% to the women. An example of this is the Forbes top-100 list of athletes. Are you familiar with this?***

Uuh no, not as far as I know.

***The Forbes top-100 list is a list that Forbes publishes annually that looks at the income of all top athletes. The best-earning athletes then appear in the top 100. If we then look at last year's list, so the year 2019, how many women do you think were in that list?***

Pfoe. This is a beautiful wake-up call that I have to think about this for so long. It may well be none....

***Almost correct! Indeed, it wasn't three years ago, that was the year after Serena Williams got pregnant. She was in it before that, and again two years after her pregnancy. Last year, in 2019, there were only 2 women in that list of the entire top 100. Another example, as given earlier, was the income of Lionel Messi in 2017 in relation to the income of Lieke Martens in 2017.***

Yes, that is really insane. The hole could really be smaller. If we were to halve the gap, it would make a huge difference.

***As one of the last questions, what would you think is the best solution right now to improve unequal pay in elite sports? Of course it does not have to be equal immediately, because that of course has an aim that takes time, but that it gets a little closer to each other.***

Pfoe. Of course I have to think about that. For example, what you as a board could do to ensure that that gap becomes smaller. That the rewards come closer together. I always look for objective criteria. Maybe you should do that by looking at what spectators appreciate. For example, if we were to watch a match of the Dutch women's team and you would ask a thousand people there what they think about it and you would get an average of 7.3 (it is of course a snapshot) and for the men that would be 6.2, then that can be a kind of comparison of how to deal with the prize money. In this case, the women would get a little more than the men. Such a criterion that is fairly objective could help.

***Last question, do you think this should come from the Dutch government or, for example, from NOC \* NSF or just through the unions themselves? So that the unions are separate from each other and that, for example, the KNVB itself determines how they deal with this.***

I think that, just as ABN AMRO does as an umbrella sponsor at various hockey clubs in the Netherlands, NOC \* NSF can do that. NOC \* NSF is of course the collection of all unions and if they would make a policy that would also call for all unions. You might wonder how well the unions are capable of doing that? But then you do have a kind of booster function.

***And if we then look at tennis, that tennis best represents this subject and that there is no longer any question of unequal payment, there is a difference in the length of the number of sets. For example, you have the best of 5 for the men and the best of 3 for the women. So in principle you could say that the men play longer and therefore have more broadcast time and could therefore earn more.***

You could do that. But that in fact also has to do with the physical differences that will come into play. Lastly, there was an example where men and women both played 3 sets, because according to research it is no longer attractive to watch the last 2 sets due to fatigue. Maybe through that entrance it will all be the same again, if we look at the duration. In tennis, the duration of a match is never fixed in advance. That is something that makes it so difficult. What sponsors are really about is how long has my brand been in the picture. They often time it to the second. If you have a man who is on the court for five sets or a woman who is on the court for three sets, there is indeed a difference between them.

You should really look at pure playing time, only in that is the pay-out almost impossible.

***So there are actually many different angles from which you can look at this point?***

Yes, that is certainly true. That makes the whole subject so very difficult to approach. For example, look at the Olympic games and the results of the Netherlands. The largest number of medals that the Netherlands wins at the Olympic Games come from women. That is not clearly reflected in TV rights, etc. What do we enjoy the most at the Olympics in the end and what gives us the most happiness, that is really the women.