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**The Bronze Ceiling:
Is there gender bias in sports statues?**



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The Bronze Ceiling?

The Sporting Statues Project

'The monuments erected by a people... reveal who the people really are.'
Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation*.

'Memorials and statues can tell us what mattered to people. From grand men who tower above us in our towns and cities, to humble war memorials in the smallest of villages that speak of a nation's grief, to gold post boxes on suburban streets that surprise and delight.'
English Heritage, *Immortalisation Exhibition, 2018*

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The Sporting Statues Project

Our aim is to examine sport history, social history and contemporary sporting, internal and national cultures and politics through the prism of sports statues through...

- Documenting statuary: Providing context for case studies, a resource for further research collaborations and a site for disseminating research: see www.sportingstatues.com
- Developing theory around existence and form: Seven papers and two book chapters, collectively assessing genre history, design, process, motivations and messages

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A few statue-tistics...

UK:

- 210 subject specific statues of sportsmen and sportswomen
- 42 anonymous statues of sportsmen and sportswomen

Worldwide football statues (inc. managers, chairmen, fans):

- 395 subject specific statues
- 195 anonymous statues

US baseball statues:

- 255 subject specific statues
- 39 anonymous statues

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A few statue-tistics...

Though they have ancient roots, statues of sportspeople are a contemporary phenomenon: over 90% of UK sports statues have been erected since 1990, a figure typically matched around the world

They are most often found at stadia/sports venues, but also in city centres, halls of fame/museums, at schools or colleges, and graveyards




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A few statue-tistics...

In the UK,

- of subject specific sports statues, just 2 (<1%) depict women
- of anonymous sports statues, 4 (<10%) depict women (and one of these is of fans, not players)




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A few statue-tistics...

Of the world's football statues,

- no subject specific statues depict women
- of the 180 anonymous statues, just 2 depict women playing football

Of the USA's baseball statues,

- no subject specific statues and just one anonymous statue depict a woman



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Research Questions...

- Is there a gender bias in sports statue subject choice?
 - The numbers obviously say yes, but...
- Does this bias exist across team *and* individual sports?
- Why does it exist?
 - Prejudice in statue subject choices?
 - A reflection of historical prejudice in sports participation and coverage?
 - A reflection of other confounding biases?
- Is it likely to change in the near future?

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Team sports?


The vast majority of sports statues are erected to celebrate achievement in team sports, particularly football (UK and elsewhere), baseball, basketball, ice hockey and American football (US), cricket (Australia)...



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Team sports?

...but women are very rarely honoured with a statue for achievement in team sports



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Team sports?

Team sports - or more specifically mass spectator team sports - have more statues because professional team sports organisations (i.e., clubs, franchises) have the resources and motivations to erect statues...

- Money (majority of team sport statues are at least part-funded by a team sports organisation)
- Organisational structures needed for statue projects
- Supporters to campaign and fund
- A location to put the statue (i.e., a stadium)
- A civic identity
- Commercial motivation to erect statues

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Team sports?

- Women's team sports have had minimal public profile and media coverage compared to men's team sports
- Fully professional women's team teams/sports are far less common than men's
- Spectator bases are small
- Stadiums are often rented not owned



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Team sports?

Globally, examples of longstanding professional women's team sports are likewise rare (Italian football? US soccer? Canadian ice hockey? Basketball in several nations?)

US women's college soccer and softball are the nearest thing to long-standing well funded women's team sports organisations? And they have statues, albeit anonymous...



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Team sports?

Women's team sports organisations are relatively cash poor, have smaller supporter bases, and shorter histories. All these factors work against statues of women who have starred in team sports.

But it's not just the facilitating factors that work against statues of women in team sports. It's also the motivations that lie behind such statues erected by sports organisations...

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Team sports?

Motivation for professional team sport organisations to erect statues at their stadium - embedding and retaining older fans, attracting new fans and sports tourists, through...

- Branding via authenticity
- Marketing via nostalgia, past success, association with nationally famous figures
- For new stadia, creating a recognisable visual identity in a featureless environment



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Team sports?

To generate nostalgia, statue subjects chosen are usually

- widely known, stalwart and successful players or managers,

and crucially...

- those who played within the reminiscence bump of today's middle-aged supporters (i.e., 20-30 years before the statue is raised) – see Stride et al, 2012.

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Team sports?

Whilst women's team sports do have *pioneers* who might be judged as statue-worthy...



...pioneers by definition come from the early development stages of a sport, not those moments embedded in mainstream consciousness. A forgotten past doesn't evoke as much nostalgia...



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Team sports?

Statue subject choices made by team sports organisations typically reflect

- **Memory, NOT History**
- **Trophy winning, NOT Pioneering participation or wider sports development**

So past and present women's sporting pioneers within team sports are likely to be side-lined just as their male counterparts are.

The same issues also hinder the use of sportswomen from team sports in civic statues as well as stadium sited statues.

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Team sports vs Individual sports?

Team sports have the most sports statues - yet very few honour women, due to:

- historical low levels of promotion of, and hence public interest in professional women's spectator team sports (and in some cases, suppression of such sporting activity)
- the motivations behind statue construction

But what about individual sports...

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Individual sports?

Athletes, male or female, are less likely to be honoured by a statue in most individual sports:


- Location?
- Fans to campaign?
- Funding?
- Public exposure?

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Individual sports?

The individual sports that are most likely to have statues celebrating their heroes are the 'danger' sports of boxing and motor-racing

- strong communities of participants/fans
- emotions and corresponding desire to commemorate aroused by
 - death in competition
 - death at a young age




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Individual sports?

- Dearth of female participation in motor-racing – not a gender separated sport today, but few women compete against men
- Until recently, lack of female participation in boxing (absence from Olympics, official and unofficial bans by national governing or licensing bodies)

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Individual sports?

Mass spectator individual sports that women have traditionally competed in... a few examples

- Tennis
- Athletics (track and field)
- Equestrianism

Equestrianism – and horse racing - rarely does statues, except of horses! Trainers tend to pay for statues, and they own (and hence celebrate) their horses, not the riders or jockeys...



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Individual sports?

Tennis

12 statues identified around the world
6 men, 6 women

No evidence of inherent gender bias in tennis statue subject selection...






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Individual sports?
Athletics (Track and Field)

- 66 subject specific statues identified around the world
- 44 men, 22 women

Statues of men and women almost entirely Olympic medal winners




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Individual sports?
Athletics (Track and Field)

- In 1952 9 women's athletic events, 24 men's events
- In 1976 13 women's athletic events, 23 men's events
- Equality still not quite achieved (due in 2020)

Ratio of statues reflects this historic bias towards more men competing



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So gender bias or no gender bias?

- Yes - but reflective of historical prejudice that prohibited participation and development of women's team sports, and the corresponding greater likelihood of team sport players getting statues
- Yes - but for individual 'danger' sports, reflective of suppressed participation by women
- Yes - but reflective of a wider prejudice in favour of heroes of popular memory against pioneers, campaigners and innovators

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So gender bias or no gender bias?

- In the few major sports where women have had the chance to compete with a measure of recognition for more than the last few decades, then winners have been honoured at a roughly similar rate to men - and pioneers have been ignored at a roughly equal rate!





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The Future...

Several reasons why I suspect we will see more statues of sportswomen in the next 20 years

- Recent athletics heroes (e.g., Ennis, Holmes) move towards reminiscence bump
- Move towards statues celebrating current heroes, in the UK and worldwide (accelerated nostalgia/shrinking reminiscence bump - and 'celebritisation' of athletes)






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The Future...

Several reasons why I suspect we will see more statues of sportswomen in the next 20 years

- Professionalisation and increasing promotion and popularisation of women's team sports
- Statues to pioneers/statues of reparation (male and female) are being campaigned for and are slowly emerging – social media facilitates this



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The Future...

Broader questions raised regarding which sports people (men or women) we immortalise?

Do we honour...

- those who invented it/made it accessible/encouraged others to partake?...
- or just those who have personally entertained us and brought glory to teams that we support?

Related to whether we see sport purely as entertainment, or as a force for inclusion, social cohesion, personal physical and mental well-being...



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Co-author wanted...

I'd like to write this up but, I don't feel so confident around the gender x sport theories and literature...

If interested see me at lunch, or contact me asap

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