



Changing conversations redefine treatment of athletes in sports

Michael Hovey, Sports Editor

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Collegian | Eli Crocker

The way fans view athletes is changing as new conversations reshape the sports landscape.

As the conversation surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion in sports continues to evolve within the United States, some fans are addressing the intricate issues at play, especially regarding women athletes, social media dynamics and the evolving treatment of athletes within various systems.

Aaunterria T. Bollinger-Deters, an instructor in the department of race, gender and ethnic studies at Colorado State University and a doctoral candidate in journalism and media communication, specializes in the intersection of digital culture, racialized womanhood and media representations.

“I love women getting recognition for the sport,” Bollinger-Deters said. “It’s important to see generational interest in women’s sports. It’s something that shows how thirsty people are for women-centric teams. The fans shouting, ‘We want a team,’ at the Colorado takeover tour showcased that there’s a real demand for women’s teams, and I believe the same for the WNBA.”

“Being able to recognize people as full and actualized people — recognizing that they’re in your care as an organization — (fosters) this understanding that we have to take care of the psychological and emotional well-being of people who, again, are in our care.” —*Aaunterria Bollinger-Deters, CSU instructor*

However, tensions persist despite the rising attention.

The treatment of women athletes stems from the history of their profession, but an increasingly digitized age creates thinner boundaries for the public. How fans react to players’ personal lives has varied.

“There are interesting tensions around women’s sports, especially in the U.S., where we love sports but also have an antithetical view on women,” Bollinger-Deters said. “The level of aggression, especially toward women athletes, is heightened by misogyny and racism, as seen with Breanna Stewart’s wife receiving death threats because of her performance. There’s a toxic competitiveness with women, and it’s also racialized.”

With a recent national increase in interest within the WNBA, athletes face greater scrutiny.

Chaz Callendar, a master’s student in the journalism and media communication department at CSU, noticed the broader societal challenges that influence DEI efforts in sports.

“DEI, at its best, is supposed to be fixing a problem that has been embedded in America for a long time,” Callendar said. “The only problem with that is that a lot of Americans don’t like the idea of it — don’t like the process of it — because fixing the structure means that people are inherently going to be shifted within a particular power structure that they have become comfortable in.”

Online media platforms have created more security in these beliefs and less reception to those opposed. As evidenced by the **Pew Research Center**, “79% (of people) in the U.S. believe access to the internet and social media has made people more divided in their political opinions.” With a more apparent integration between athletes and the beliefs they hold, this effect could extend to a more divisive level.

Luckily, good still exists within the sports sphere.

“On social media, fans will create accounts to uplift underappreciated players, showing the positive ways people connect through sports,” Bollinger-Deters said. “But there’s also toxicity with players receiving death threats when they perform poorly, such as in betting losses. It’s a toxic space but also one where fans rally around players they want to see succeed.”

The popularization of sports gambling led to a record-high **\$11 billion** in annual revenue in 2023. Athletes are, of course, at the center of that rapid expansion.

In a separate evolution, college athletes are now more intertwined in dollars than ever before. While the structure of college sports may have changed, its effect still remains the same.

“It is a money-making scheme,” Callendar said. “Athletes are there to be able to fund the university. That’s why we have this, you know, a massive football stadium that costs (\$220 million), but, like, our teachers, we have adjuncts who still can’t make a livable wage because adjuncts don’t fund the university — the stadium does.”

Having experienced both roles, Callendar felt the pressure as an athlete.

“I played basketball for over half of my life,” Callendar said. “But I was also well aware that as a young Black man playing basketball, there was this inherent playing, entertaining the crowd who don’t necessarily see you as a human being.”

Some sports fans aren’t as receptive to personal showings from athletes, as they are paid professionals in a particular sport. Navigating societal roles has become increasingly harder, and athletes often have contractual obligations to a certain organization or team with its own unique set of values.

“Stay in your lane,” essentially comes from not choosing what the particular fan wants you to say,” Callendar said. “Because (they) always (say), ‘Stay in your lane,’ when ... you’re advocating for DEI or something that actually goes against how sports are structured.”

Sports organizations often face tension between traditional structures and the evolving needs of their athletes. Recognizing their psychological boundaries and emotional well-being is essential for fostering a healthy, sustainable relationship in any context.

“There has to be more kind of engagement with health and well-being just overall and not necessarily as it pertains to how someone plays the sport,” Bollinger-Deters said. “Being able to recognize people as full and actualized people — recognizing that they’re in your care as an organization — (fosters) this understanding that we have to take care of the psychological and emotional well-being of people who, again, are in our care.”

The focus on athletes’ mental and emotional well-being extends beyond just the care provided by organizations. It also includes the broader environment that can shape their access to opportunities. Economic barriers, such as the high costs of equipment and stigma surrounding certain sports, can create significant disparities, further complicating the athlete’s experience — even from a young age.

“If we’re talking about economic disenfranchisement as a part of the conversation, (we are) just thinking about how expensive gear is,” Bollinger-Deters said, “Having the notion that you could have a jersey or that you could have a hockey sweater or something like that — that walking around in that has a status of affluence to it. ... (People are) alienated from certain sports because they don’t meet a certain economic bracket.”

As DEI efforts in sports continue to gain momentum, the conversation remains multifaceted. From recognizing the systemic biases that hinder athletes, particularly women and people of color, to pushing for better mental health support and accessible opportunities, the goal is clear: to create an environment where all athletes are valued, supported and able to succeed.

“There’s something really distinct for accessibility and also having investments in certain types of people playing certain types of sports,” Bollinger-Deters said.

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Michael Hovey, Sports Editor

Michael Hovey is one of the sports editors for *The Rocky Mountain Collegian*, facilitating the sports desk, collaborating with reporters and writing pieces of his own. He joined the newspaper in February and has greatly appreciated all the opportunities that have come with the organization. After settling on a business administration major with a concentration in marketing, Hovey stumbled upon *The Collegian* at the recommendation of a friend. Writing news stories gave him a deeper connection to Colorado State University and its community, making his studies that much more meaningful. Having played numerous sports at a fairly mediocre level, Hovey jumped at the opportunity to cover Division I sporting events. He now gets the chance to surround himself with talented writers, artists and athletes while exercising his preferred form of the English language. Hovey’s favorite part of the job is meeting new people and learning about the things they’ve dedicated their lives to. The most surprising part has been the extraneous passions he’s discovered in nearly each one of these people. Hovey’s main goal this year is to foster discovery and allow people in athletics to show a separate side of themselves that may not generally be known. His secondary goal: Try not to stutter on a national broadcast. If not working at *The Collegian*, Hovey can be found engaging in outdoor activities, finding something tasty or listening to hip-hop.

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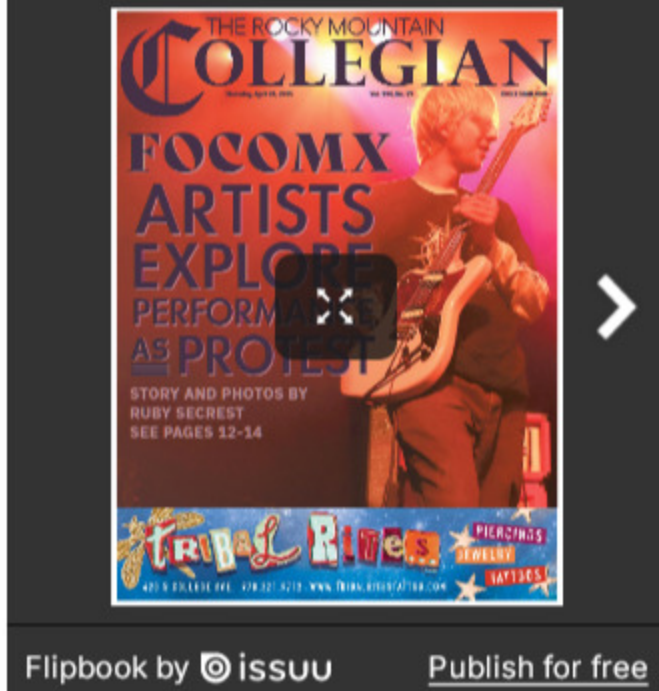
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