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# Why professional women's sport is less popular than men's

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A FEW hours before the men's Tour de France arrived in Paris on July 27th, a group (or peloton) of women cyclists dashed up the Champs Elysees. La Course, a one-day race organised by the people behind the Tour de France, is the latest attempt to launch a women's version of the race. Previous efforts have foundered because of a lack of interest among sponsors and the public. The difficulty of creating a women's Tour illustrates a wider phenomenon: with a few exceptions, professional women's sport is much less popular than the male equivalent. Why?



If there were more sponsorship and media coverage, some say, then women's sport would be more popular. Media outlets and sponsors retort that if women's sport attracted more interest in the first place then they would invest more time and money in it. All sides agree on what it takes to make a sport successful: a balance of consumer, media and commercial appeal.

Sponsors are unwilling to finance individuals and teams that don't get good exposure—and few female athletes do. The Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) reported that in 2013 women's sports received 7% of coverage and 0.4% of the total value of commercial sponsorships. This is a vicious circle: viewers want to watch sports at the highest professional standard, and sponsors want to be associated with the best athletes. Because of the lack of sponsorship many female athletes, even those who represent their countries, have to fit training around employment. Those who are paid usually get less than male colleagues. The Professional

Golfers' Association, for instance, offers \$256m in prize money; the women's association offers only \$50m. This inequality is echoed in pay for coaches for women's teams.

Things are changing. The English women's cricket team became professional earlier this month, signing a two-year sponsorship deal with Kia, a carmaker, after winning back-to-back Ashes contests. Wimbledon, the oldest tennis tournament, started awarding women the same amount of prize money as men in 2007, and the prize money for the winner of La Course is equivalent to that for a stage winner in Le Tour. Other sports are being leaned on to follow suit. More strikingly the opinion of sports fans seems to be shifting: 61% of fans surveyed by the WSFF said they believed top sportswomen were just as skilful as their male equivalents and over half said women's sport was just as exciting to watch. This will matter more when, as seems likely, the increasing numbers of women participating in regular sport yield more potential pros. In Britain 750,000 adults took up team sports after the Olympics; 500,000 of them were women. More female participants and viewers should encourage sponsors and the media to balance their coverage. Until then, athletes could consider taking a leaf out of Marie Marvingt's book. In 1908, when she was denied the right to ride the Tour de France because she was a woman, she ignored the rules and raced anyway, 15 minutes behind the men. Of the 115 people who started the 4,488-kilometre (2,789-mile) race that year, only 37 managed to complete it: 36 men and one woman.

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