

Why Don't Men's and Women's Basketball Receive the Same Support?

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MEAC champions. Multiple NCAA tournament appearances. One Division II NCAA tournament championship. The Hampton University women's basketball team has been a top contender in Division I basketball since joining the MEAC in 1995.

The men's basketball team has multiple NCAA tournament appearances, conference tournament championships and regular season championships. Both teams made it to the 2018 MEAC championship with a record of 21-4 in the conference. But one important factor stands out in a big way: the number of fans.

Nearly twice as many people attend men's basketball games. The women's team barely averaged 2,600 spectators for its 11 home games in the 2017-2018 season. Meanwhile, the men's team averaged 4,205. Overall, the average attendance at all (home and away) women's games is 1,696, while attendance at men's games averages 3,530 for all games.

The reasons are complicated, say those involved, including the way the games are marketed and advertised, differences in the way the teams play, scheduling of home games and – perhaps most concerning – gender bias.

Marketing and advertising appears to be handled equitably, with an equal amount of public relations time spent on both men's and women's team.

Both are advertised throughout the city of Hampton, on campus and on print and online platforms.

"We try to as the athletic marketing team to make it more equal because they are equally as good," said junior Marshall Bennett. "The women's team has more conference championships than the men."

Even Bennett said he is concerned about attendance.

"We don't understand why the people don't come to see the women as much as the men."

Some fans say they enjoy both teams equally, but others say they prefer men's games because they are more aggressive, faster-paced and more dramatic, both on and off the court. The fans respond more enthusiastically at the men's games.

Lizzie Allen is an avid basketball fan who loves both teams. She has been to all of the men's and women's games this year.

"I played ball in high school, so it's kind of my way of staying connected," said Allen. They're both good teams, so it's actually entertaining to watch."

But other students go to men's games more because they say there is more

action and it is more entertaining. Men can run faster, jump higher, and have more strength. These traits make the game more interesting, some say.

"Men and women are not valued the same in this country but that's a bigger issue," said Allen.

This is where the conversation gets complicated. Gender bias appears to be part of the answer to uneven attendance.

"Students go to men's games because of preference," said senior guard K'Lynn Willis. "The preference is always men's over women's and if people prefer the NBA over the WNBA, they'll go to an NBA game."

One big difference is the use of dunking. In women's professional and college games, dunking is extremely rare. But the crowds seem to enjoy dunking from their enthusiastic reactions.

"A lot of people just want to see men's over women's because of athleticism. Women are more fundamentally sound, but athletically wise it's more appealing to see men dunk than a woman shoot," Willis said.

Scheduling may also hurt attendance at women's games. During the 2017-2018 season, there were more double headers for men's and women's basketball games. This means that on certain days, the women's team will play first and the men's team will play after. The women's game is never scheduled in the prime time on those days.

The women's games usually start around 4:00-5:00 p.m. and the men's games around 6:00-7:00 p.m. The early start time may hurt attendance by students who have afternoon classes, and people who are working or just getting off work. The on-campus cafeteria also does not open until 5:30 p.m. for dinner, making some fans choose between hunger and the game. Staying for both takes more than four hours, which may be too much of a commitment for some fans.

Scheduling will change once the transition to the Big South conference is complete. There will be far fewer double-headers. Only three are scheduled for the 2018-2019 season. In addition, the women will play more games in the evening and on Saturdays. This scheduling change could help increase attendance at women's basketball games.

The men's basketball players enthusiastically support the women's teams and attend games whenever possible. They feel as though they learn more by watching women's basketball and support their counterparts in the basketball program.

One of the men's players enjoys watching the women play and tries to attend as many home games as he can.

"I actually learn from watching women's basketball," said senior guard Lysander Bracey. "Women have more fundamentals than men's basketball. Supporting them is important and we should all do that."

One theory of why people support men's basketball more is tradition. Men's basketball has been around longer and has developed a larger following.

Hampton's women's team was formed in 1975 and men's team in 1967. The same parallel exists in professional basketball, where the NBA has a 50-year head start.

"We're all doing the same thing. Putting in all this time and doing all this work. I think there has to be more support for the women," Bracy said. "It's unfair."

Viewership could also be increased by changing the rules and regulations of women's basketball to make it more entertaining. For instance, the rims could be lowered so that taller women players could dunk. It's a controversial topic because some women players find the idea insulting.

"We're constantly being compared to men. We have people excelling at a ten-foot rim and now you're asking us to lower the rim so we can continually be compared ..." said Los Angeles Sparks player Nneka Ogwumike, during an interview with The Undefeated. "... now someone like me, who has done what she's done, has to relearn the game"

Some people believe that just having the conversation will help create a change.

"I just feel like more women athletes at every level needs to speak on it," said junior guard Ashley Bates. "The more people speak on it the more it is seen."