

# 4. Sports journalism on the rise

*Avashnee Moodley*

You are either passionate about sport or not. One of the main reasons I studied journalism was my love for sport. The love came from my parents. My dad was a regular at the Kingsmead cricket ground and was an avid fan. I regularly attended matches with him. My first sporting memories are of the 1992 Cricket World Cup. Through the years, I developed a liking for football and would spend all my time watching the Premier Soccer League (PSL) and English Premier League (EPL) matches on television. Some of my fondest recollections were watching Manchester United becoming the champions in the inaugural season of the PSL. Following in my dad's footsteps, I became a Manchester United fan.



Many careers are shaped by individuals and mentors, and my journalism career was no different. I grew up listening to and watching Donna Symmonds, Martin Locke and Cynthia Chaka, and knew this is what I wanted to do. During my first year of journalism studies at the Durban University of Technology, I volunteered at a community station, Radio Hindvani where I began doing sports updates and, thereafter, hosted a weekly sports show. I did live cricket updates during international matches, and forged strong relationships with many sports journalists from around the world in the media centre at Kingsmead. My career was a bit different to what I thought it would be as I ended up in print media at the Sunday Times Extra and then The Citizen newspaper where I worked in the news department. I was lucky enough to cover the 2010 FIFA World Cup hosted in South Africa.

Sports journalism is often described as one of the lesser forms of reporting in the newsroom, with many seeing it as 'not serious'. However, the evolution of sports into a mega industry and the impact of new technology has made this industry more lucrative with new career opportunities. Sport has the power to give us everlasting memories, like 'where were you?' moments, which is best described by sports commentators and writers. With impeccable vocabulary and descriptions, British football commentators Jon Champion, Martin Tyler, Ian Darke and Peter Drury come to mind as they help keep those lifetime moments entrenched in our memories.

In general, journalism has evolved over the past 25 years with the traditional form of media transitioning into digital. The original business model of journalism is no longer sustainable as seen by the decline in print media. Before the 1990s, newspapers and printed magazines were the main source of fixtures and results. However, the tide has turned with newsrooms around the world coming under enormous pressure. The steady decline in print circulation in the past two decades has seen devastating declines in advertising revenues and profit margins. This has led to a number of layoffs across the industry including the closing of several publications, including those focused on sports.



**Zai Khan**

Part of the reason for the decline in print media is the rise of the internet. Digital advancement has meant that journalists now go live from an event and can react within seconds of any occurrence. Updates of newsworthy items are instant. The growth of social media and real time news allow people to be informed as well as grow their own profiles, and for prominent personalities to update their audiences. With social media, news and sports break instantly on platforms such as Twitter which has only 140 characters. Most celebrities and sports professionals use these platforms to keep their fans and the public in the know, while there are also fan-based accounts that post updates. Due to its massive range, the sports industry has, over the last few years, been equipped with technology for journalists. Technology has changed, and it is often said that social media has altered the traditional sense of journalism. As a result, the industry has seen the emergence of a new trend that has come to represent the new face of sports media and is driven by sportsmen and women.

Professional sports people, now guiding their own narrative

through social media, are immensely important to the sports media industry as they represent the present and the future of the way consumers get their sports information. Stories from these professionals on their media platforms enable them to engage with fans. The growth of social media outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter, have already changed the way fans get their sports-related news, statistics, highlights, and overall content. Fans all over the world want to hear directly from their favourite stars. In football, Cristiano Ronaldo has the highest figures on Instagram with around 215 million followers and, according to Forbes, became the first person to hit the 200 million mark. Ronaldo is frequently seen updating his social media platforms with his family, lifestyle or game information. This has led to many endorsements with numerous brands. An Instagram post from him reportedly costs several millions.

Over the past decade, sports events have attracted huge audiences from around the world resulting in broadcast rights taking centre stage. The EPL broadcast rights reportedly cost around R180 million for three seasons. In South Africa, Multichoice/DSTV holds most of the sports broadcast rights as the national broadcaster has not been able to compete over the past few years. This has resulted in the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) buying selected rights from Supersport for most global sports events. The two broadcasters were at loggerheads over the domestic football league at the start of the 2019/2020 season and resolved the matter after the intervention of the sports minister. The SABC eventually signed a sub-licencing deal, reportedly worth R72 million a year, with Supersport to broadcast some of the matches on television and radio. Sport is becoming a profitable advertising and promotion tool under the influence of mass media. It has now become an attractive economic activity for brands which see this as a key investment. However, rising costs in broadcast rights often hinder opportunities for journalists in smaller or medium-sized organisations that are unable to compete.

It has been a challenging journey for women in the sports journalism industry as this sector has always been dominated by male journalists. While there were a handful of female sports journalists in the early 1990s, we have seen an increase in the industry over the last decade, most of whom have held their own against their male counterparts. The likes of Cheryl Roberts and Janet Whitton have been joined by people such as Zai Khan, Natalie Germanos and Firdose Moonda. However, there was a massive divide in the types of sports that male and female journalists would cover. It's only in recent times that we have seen female journalists being integrated into covering and reporting on male-led sports. This gender inequality has been driven over the centuries by a patriarchal society which many cultures subscribe to. Women in society continue to fight for gender equality and have to work twice as hard to get recognised in most male-dominated industries.

Supersport football presenter Julia Stuart has cracked the glass ceiling. She always loved sports, and became obsessed with football in her teenage years. Julia became the sports editor at the Daily Voice newspaper, and made television and radio appear-

ances as an analyst. This led to her joining eNCA as a junior reporter. Julia's growth in the sports broadcast industry can be attributed to being relentless and telling people about her capabilities. However, she maintains it's a very difficult industry, and society is very patriarchal with people in power still being males. Julia is not averse to talking about the challenges faced. At some of the stadiums, there are no female toilets in close proximity to the media box. Moreover, female journalists have to always work twice as hard to be considered good, and are still continuously critiqued more on their looks than their knowledge of sports.



**Julia Stuart**

Julia is an excellent role model for those, especially females, wishing to join the terrain of sports broadcasting. She says that there is plenty of preparatory work, and each occasion is different depending on the type of broadcast. One day she can be pitchside and the next could be hosting the show from the studio. Julia adds that teleprompters are not used at Supersport. The success of the show falls squarely on the shoulders of the host so preparation by keeping abreast of what's happening in the industry is crucial. Julia's recipe for success is always maintaining respect, learning constantly, remaining positive and being self-motivated.

Thato Moeng is another personality who has made her mark in the world of sports. She studied journalism and served her internship at YFM. Thato's beat was politics, and she produced a weekly political show. However, she harboured a love for sports. Over and above her duties in the newsroom, she found time to assist sports colleagues in writing stories. Her break in sports broadcasting came when she had to fill in for someone - the gates of sports journalism had been flung open for Thato.

# “Female journalists are critiqued more on their looks than knowledge of sports”

However, the journey was not easy as she recalls her editor advising it was a male-dominated industry. There were not many female journalists who would go to press conferences or the training ground, but Thato saw it as an opportunity to do some

coalface journalistic work. When she was cutting her teeth in sports journalism, it was only people like Carol Shabalala and Cynthia Chaka on the beat. Thato strongly believes, notwithstanding the hurdles, it's possible to become a successful female journalist.

Key to changing the mindset in sports journalism is diversifying sports newsrooms, which has been a challenge over the years. The opportunities for women in sports journalism have grown tremendously. There are more female field reporters working for major football networks than ever before. Some have even anchored World Cup finals and played a pivotal role in major sports events. Women are now following their dreams and passion to cover sports, and the perception of them not being able to succeed has long gone by!

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