

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 162, No. 7

Serving Chicago's legal community for 161 years

Women in sports make a name for themselves in 2015

Was 2015 a seminal year for women in sports? Looking back, it sure seems that way. Female athletes achieved many firsts in 2015, as did other women in areas of sports that are traditionally dominated by men. And perhaps just as importantly, 2015 saw the continuation of an attitude adjustment toward more respect for women's athletic abilities.

Let's start with the awards and accolades. Sports Illustrated named tennis star Serena Williams Sportsperson of the Year, the first woman to receive this distinction in 32 years. Williams won three out of the four Grand Slam events in 2015.

Not only was she ranked the No. 1 female player in the world, for the first time in the history of the Women's Tennis Association rankings, Williams accumulated twice as many points as the No. 2 ranked player.

Williams, who has been a dominating force in women's tennis for years, is well recognized by both tennis fans and those who don't know a serve from a volley.

In contrast, mixed martial arts fighter Ronda Rousey — who remained undefeated from her 2010 debut until a stunning upset in November — raised both her public profile and mainstream interest in MMA in 2015.

At the 2015 ESPY Awards, ESPN gave its Best Female Athlete Award to Rousey. The New York Times called her the most successful female MMA fighter of all time.

In the past year, women have also broken down barriers in other areas of the sports world, including coaching and officiating. The Oakland Athletics hired the first female coach in MLB history.

In 2011, Justine Siegal became the first woman to throw batting practice in the majors during the Cleveland Indians spring training. She's since thrown batting practice for a number of teams, including the Oakland

Athletics, Tampa Bay Rays, St. Louis Cardinals, Houston Astros and New York Mets.

Siegal served a two-week coaching stint in the Athletics' instructional league in October as a guest instructor for the team's prospects.

The NFL also scored its first female coach. The Arizona Cardinals named Jennifer Welter, a preseason coaching intern, to assist in coaching the team's linebackers.

While having a female coach on a men's professional team was a first for the NFL, it wasn't a first for Welter, who not only coached linebackers for the Texas Revolution — a men's professional indoor football team — but she also played running back for the team in 2014 (and for 14 years on women's teams).

The NFL also signed on its first female full-time game official, Sarah Thomas. While Thomas does not have the distinction of being the first female to officiate an NFL game (Shannon Eastin served as a replacement during the officials' lockout in 2012), she is the first female full-time official.

In addition, she was the first woman to officiate a major college football game (for Conference USA) and the first to officiate a bowl game (the 2009 Little Caesars Bowl).

Of all the major sports leagues, the NBA seems to — at least historically — be the most welcoming to women. Becky Hammon, who served as an assistant coach with the San Antonio Spurs since 2014 (the first female full-time coach in the NBA), served as head coach of the team's summer league in 2015, leading the Spurs to the Las Vegas Summer League title in July.

With Hammon, the NBA actually now has two female assistant coaches and two female referees — and Michele Roberts heads the NBA Players Association as executive director.

Off the field, ESPN broadcaster Jessica Mendoza scored a

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



**DOUGLAS N. MASTERS
AND SETH A. ROSE**

Douglas N. Masters is a partner at Loeb & Loeb LLP, where he litigates and counsels clients primarily in intellectual property, advertising and unfair competition. He is deputy chairman of the firm's advanced media and technology department and co-chair of the firm's intellectual property protection group. He can be reached at dmasters@loeb.com. Seth A. Rose is a partner at the firm, where he counsels clients on programs and initiatives in advertising, marketing, promotions, media, sponsorships, entertainment, branded and integrated marketing, and social media. He can be reached at srose@loeb.com.

series of firsts this year. Mendoza, who joined ESPN in 2007, became the network's first woman to call a nationally televised MLB playoff game, the first female game analyst on "Monday Night Baseball" and the first female "Sunday Night Baseball" analyst.

For male athletes, more wins and more visibility often mean more — and more lucrative — endorsements. In 2015, women started to claim a larger share of endorsement deals as well. While a hopeful sign of their increasing influence in the sports world, women athletes still have a long way to go before beginning to approach the amount of endorsements male athletes receive.

The top 100 athletes raked in an estimated \$917 million in endorsements in 2015, according to opendorse.com, an online platform that connects marketers with athletes for endorsement campaigns. Overall, women appeared just 10 times on the Opendorse list and made a little more than 8 percent of the total earnings.

Tennis star Maria Sharapova is the highest ranked woman at No. 12 with \$23 million earned from endorsement deals alone. Companies like Avon, Evian, Porsche and Samsung have all lined up to have Sharapova pitch their wares. That's less than half the \$58 million No. 1-ranked

tennis champ Roger Federer collected from Gillette, Mercedes-Benz, Nike, Rolex and Wilson, Opendorse notes.

And, in case anyone's wondering, Williams is No. 20 on the Opendorse list with \$13 million from deals with Chase, Gatorade, Wilson, Nike and Hewlett-Packard.

Down the list is Rousey at No. 65 with \$3.5 million earned from Budweiser, Buffalo Jeans, Reebok and Monster Energy endorsements.

What can make the difference? As an example, Rousey may not yet have quite the fortune of other female athletes, but her fame grew considerably this past year. Her increasing crossover appeal with audiences less familiar with her work inside the MMA octagon has been fueled by small roles in the 2015 films "Entourage" and "Furious 7."

She's also set to appear in 2016's "Roadhouse" remake. In addition, Rousey's best-selling autobiography, "My Fight/Your Fight," published in May, and her appearance in the style pages of The New York Times, have also helped new audiences see her as more than her "rowdy" MMA persona.

While female athletes at the highest levels seek to make their mark outside their sports to broaden their appeal and increase their earning potentials,

parity with male athletes remains elusive.

Men's sports get more television coverage and more attention overall. As 13-year-old Ayla, a Massachusetts women's soccer fan, wrote to President Barack Obama during the Women's World Cup: "I hate the fact that

boys['] sports always get the most attention. I want to do something about it."

Obama apparently took Ayla's desire seriously. After the U.S. women's soccer team won the 2015 FIFA World Cup, he invited the team — and his pen pal — to the White House. Ayla introduced the

president at the event, according to the White House blog.

Whether the gains made by female athletes, coaches, referees and broadcasters in 2015 will translate into increased visibility and endorsements, as well as opportunities for other women in sports, remains to be

seen. Nonetheless, if 2015 is indicative, women are on the right track and unlikely to return to the lower value placed on female sports a dozen years ago.

Or, as Obama said as he congratulated Team USA: "Playing like a girl means you're a badass."