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UConn Women Are Good for the Game

By JERÉ LONGMAN

It has become fashionable to say that Connecticut's [72-game winning streak](#) is bad for women's basketball, as if greatness can be as choking and stifling as weeds.

At best, that growing suggestion is ignorant of college basketball history; at worst, it is a wearying, sexist attempt to diminish the achievement of women, who were too long excluded from sports and are still too often forced to apologize for sweating.

All sports need dynasties to cement their popularity. Baseball needed the Yankees, professional football needed the [Green Bay Packers](#), professional basketball needed the [Boston Celtics](#) and the [Los Angeles Lakers](#) and the [Chicago Bulls](#). Would as many people pay attention to golf if not for [Tiger Woods's](#) professional birdies and personal bogeys?

And just as college basketball needed the [U.C.L.A.](#) men in the 1960s and '70s, it now needs the women's dominance of [UConn](#) and Tennessee for visibility and viability.

"Connecticut's winning streak is one of the greatest things ever to happen to women's basketball," said Van Chancellor, the women's coach at Louisiana State, who won four consecutive championships with the Houston Comets of the [W.N.B.A.](#)

"It's all over TV and newspapers. Everyone is talking about it. I think true men's basketball fans are more aware of UConn's winning streak than almost anything else we've done in the women's game."

And yet, as frequently happens, women are held to a different standard, derided as somehow lesser or undeserving.

The U.C.L.A. men won 10 championships in 12 seasons under John Wooden from 1964 to 1975, and posted [88 consecutive victories](#) from 1971 to 1974, achievements that were largely celebrated with hardwood hosannas. Wooden became the Wizard of Westwood. So why, with six national titles and a seventh expected soon, isn't [Geno Auriemma](#) widely considered the Sorcerer of Storrs?

Instead, the UConn women are criticized for winning too often, by too many points.

“I don’t remember anyone saying U.C.L.A. was bad for basketball,” Auriemma said.

Is women’s college basketball as balanced as men’s basketball today? No, but real-time comparisons are unfair. The truly equitable measure is to judge the two sports at similar moments in their development. Using that more reasonable calculation, it can be argued that women’s basketball is more competitive, not less, than men’s basketball was at the same stage of its evolution.

“I think people try to use the streak to say women’s basketball is not as good as men’s basketball,” said Harry Perretta, the women’s coach at Villanova, which [ended a 70-game winning streak](#) by UConn in 2003. “But we’re in the same growing situation as men’s basketball was X amount of years ago. People don’t see the timeline.”

The men’s [N.C.A.A.](#) basketball tournament began in 1939; the women did not have one until 1982 — a decade after the passage of the gender-equity legislation known as Title IX. This year’s women’s N.C.A.A. tournament will be its 29th. The 29th men’s tournament occurred in 1967 — as the U.C.L.A. dynasty kicked into full swing with Lew Alcindor, now [Kareem Abdul-Jabbar](#), consummating a 30-0 season and winning the first of what would become seven consecutive titles for the [Bruins](#).

Essentially, there is zero difference in the trajectory of men’s and women’s college basketball. The women’s game is still in its comparative infancy. Dominant champions are predictable and necessary, just as they were for the men. If anything, it is more difficult for the UConn women to win titles now than it was for Alcindor and [Bill Walton](#) at U.C.L.A. decades ago.

“Look at us, defending champions knocked out in the first round last year,” said Pat Summitt, who has won eight national titles at Tennessee.

Until Wooden won his last title in 1975, his best U.C.L.A. teams played in N.C.A.A. tournaments that were limited to 25 teams and — most important — one per conference. Thus, some great teams were not allowed to challenge the Bruins’ supremacy, like Southern California of 1970-71, a top-five squad that lost only to U.C.L.A. in the regular season.

Before 1975, those U.C.L.A. teams had to win four tournament games to capture a national title, not the six that UConn must win in a 64-team field that includes all of the nation’s elite teams.

Moreover, before 1974, U.C.L.A. played only tournament opponents from Western states until the Final Four, which limited threats to the Bruins and resulted in some of the same lopsided results in the West Region for which UConn is now criticized — 100-76 over Brigham Young in

1965, 109-60 over Wyoming in 1967, 90-52 over Santa Clara in 1969, 101-79 over Utah State in 1970 and 90-58 over Weber State in 1972.

True, U.C.L.A. did not win every game by double figures in building its 88-game winning streak as UConn has in winning 72 straight.

But it often was just as dominant in its glory days. In fact, U.C.L.A. set a single-game scoring record at home, since broken, with a 133-84 trouncing of none other than Pete Maravich and L.S.U. on Dec. 13, 1969. After that game, Maravich said: "U.C.L.A. should join the N.B.A. They'd fit right in."

So, UConn is not a runaway train. It is simply following a track parallel to the growth of men's basketball.

"Teams that become consistent winners and play at a certain level, fans love that, respect it," Auriemma said.

"I don't care whether it is the Yankees, the Patriots, us, whoever. To dismiss that is demeaning."