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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Attendance at Women's College Basketball Games Is Surging

Sabrina Ionescu has turned Oregon women's games into a hot ticket, but the Ducks aren't the only team seeing a boost in popularity



Oregon guard Sabrina Ionescu waves to the crowd.

PHOTO: THOMAS BOYD/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Laine Higgins

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The hottest tickets in college basketball have historically been for games in which the athletes were men. Thanks to a transcendent star and a hotly competitive 2020 season in the women's game, that's starting to change.

The popularity of women's college basketball games is surging this winter, with several programs saying that women's games now account for over 50% of basketball attendance at their schools. In some cases, the women are the hottest ticket in town. Although the face value of tickets to women's games is often slightly less than for the men's contests, the average resale value for women's games can be nearly double.

Years from now, this phenomenon might be called the “Sabrina Effect,” after Oregon’s once-in-a-generation guard Sabrina Ionescu. Since her arrival on campus, attendance at Matthew Knight Arena for women’s games has skyrocketed. During the 2016-17 season, when Ionescu was a freshman and the Ducks’ men’s team made a run to the Final Four, the women accounted for just 19% of total attendance. This season, with the Oregon women currently ranked third and the men ranked 13th in the respective Associated Press polls, Ionescu’s team is responsible for 58% of basketball attendance in Eugene.

“Ionescu is such a blessing to women’s sport right now and in particular to women’s basketball,” said Nancy Lough, a professor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas who studies gender equity in sports.

Oregon is not the only Pac-12 school whose women’s basketball team has seen a significant surge in popularity. At No. 14 Oregon State, the women’s team accounts for 60% of total attendance, adjusted for the number of games, according to NCAA data, up from 48% in 2016-17. Ditto at unranked California, where women’s basketball attendance has grown from 19% four years ago to 31% of the total in the 2019-20 season. At No. 7 Stanford, the share of women’s attendance dipped from 45% in 2016-17 to 38% the following season and is back up to 48% in 2019-20.

Attendance is also growing in the Southeastern Conference, where South Carolina and No. 9 Mississippi State play. Just over 50% of attendance in Columbia is for women’s games. Mississippi State’s women’s team accounts for 54% of all basketball attendance at the school. Again, this is partially due to the strength of the women’s SEC teams on a national level compared with the men. Still, this level of sustained interest in college basketball across the country is unprecedented.



South Carolina guard LeLe Grissett takes a shot against Texas A&M.

PHOTO: SEAN RAYFORD/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The increased popularity of the women's game is also driving up prices on the secondary market. Securing a seat to watch the Oregon women play is more expensive than seeing the men: women's tickets go for \$49 on average, according to data compiled for The Wall Street Journal by Vivid Seats. While men's games require an average of \$29 to get in the door. Viewing ticket price as a proxy for demand, the female Ducks are the hottest commodity in sports-mad Eugene.

This lopsided pricing dynamic on the secondary market is also in play at several other schools with powerhouse women's programs. Getting in the door to watch the No. 1 ranked South Carolina women's team costs \$40 on average, while men's tickets go for \$23, according to Vivid Seats. At traditional powerhouse Connecticut, women's tickets cost \$48 on average compared with \$33 for the men.

To be sure, these prices are a reflection of the relative competitiveness of the specific men's and women's programs in question. The Gamecocks women's team are the favorites to win the 2020 national championship while the men's team is ranked 63rd in the NET and will likely finish its season in the National Invitation Tournament. The same is true for the Huskies. The women's team is historically dominant, albeit in the midst of a down year for the program with three losses this season; the men's team has experienced a prolonged dry spell since winning the 2014 national championship.

Historically, women's sports have usually garnered widespread attention when a transcendent athlete comes along and does something unprecedented, explained Lough. Think Serena Williams in tennis or Mikaela Shiffrin in downhill skiing. Women's college hoops has that this year in Ionescu: in February the senior became the only player, male or female, in college basketball to record 2,000 points, 1,000 assists and 1,000 rebounds in his or her career.

"ESPN quite simply couldn't ignore her. It's that simple," said Lough.

The rising popularity of women's college basketball in 2020 is the culmination of several trends. Most significant is a generational shift about who can be a fan of women's sports, says sports marketing consultant Joe Favorito.

"The movement started with Title IX, but it took a lot longer than we thought," he said. "We've now reached a generation where it's not just OK, but it's really not unexpected that, no matter if you are a man, woman, boy or girl, if you want to go see quality athletes, some of those quality athletes that you can root for may be women."

That's a major shift from the prevailing attitude in sports marketing that only women could reliably be fans of women's sports. Recent studies, however, have proved that just isn't true: Lough's research found that 84% of sports fans support women's sports.

Second, the landscape of women's college basketball has changed dramatically in recent years. For much of the 2000s, Connecticut women's team dominated, winning 10 of the last 20 national championships. But as participation in women's basketball has risen, so has the number of talented athletes playing college hoops. Quite simply there are too many great women's basketball players for all of them to end up in Storrs, Conn.



Connecticut's Crystal Dangerfield shoots over Oregon's Sabrina Ionescu.

PHOTO: JESSICA HILL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Consider how much things have changed in Ionescu's college career. During her first campaign in 2016-17, the Huskies had just won the last four national championships and were in the midst of an unprecedented 126-game win streak. UConn finally lost to Mississippi State in the 2017 Final Four. Other programs started to break into the national consciousness at that time thanks to viral moments, like Notre Dame winning the 2018 NCAA Tournament on Arike Ogunbowale's buzzer-beater shots in the semi-final and championship games.

Today there are a handful of programs that could rightly be considered to be on equal footing with UConn, including Baylor, Notre Dame, Oregon, Mississippi State and South Carolina. Of the teams ranked in the top 10, not one is undefeated. Within the top 25 there are 12 teams with three losses or fewer, including No. 6 UConn who has lost to Baylor, Oregon and South Carolina.

"The parity and what that suggests is the women's sports product is way beyond what it's ever been before with the quality of the athletes and what's on the floor," said Lough.

"That's what's driving the ticket sales and the attendance."

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

The rising popularity of women's college basketball in 2020 is the culmination of several trends. Which trend do you think is the most significant one?

Write to Laine Higgins at laine.higgins@wsj.com

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