

## Why Did We Care About Kacy Catanzaro?

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“Catanzaro, feet away from doing it,” *American Ninja Warrior* host Matt Iseman yelled, audibly excited for the historic moment to come.

“Do you think she smells victory here? Do you think she smells victory here?!” Iseman’s co-host, Akbar Gbaja Biamala shrieked into his microphone. Kacy Catanzaro, 24 years old, at 5 feet even, 100 pounds (Kacy), was about to set history, become a role model for women everywhere, and launch *American Ninja Warrior* above all of its competitors in ratings (Bibel).

*American Ninja Warrior* is a television game show of sorts, where the competitors must tackle obstacle courses of increasing difficulty. To make it to the national finals, each competitor must complete a regional qualifying course, followed by a regional finals course. At the national finals, usually held in Las Vegas, the competitors must conquer all four stages of the course to achieve total victory. This is a feat that had, at this point, only been accomplished in the Japanese version of the show, never before on American soil. With the competition’s growing popularity, however, many felt that this could be the year we crown a victor.

Now, hanging onto two red rings, Kacy swung her body effortlessly, and landed on the pad to finish the obstacle, dubbed the Ring Toss. “And she’s done it,” Iseman proclaims, barely audible over a screaming crowd. “Kacy Catanzaro, matching the best performance we’ve ever seen by a woman!”

Wait, what? *Matching the best performance?* The crowd is on their feet, clapping, whistling, and yelling, but she has yet to finish the course. The way the crowd was reacting, I thought she had finished the course.

I originally saw this clip, like many, as it made its way around the internet via social media. My initial reaction? I had to show my wife. This was incredible! It didn’t even occur to me that, amid all the excitement in the video, I was missing the elephant in the room: Why did I care about Kacy Catanzaro? She was slower than most of her competitors. Before she started the course, the announcers told us that she had never finished any course before, so she had no name recognition or reputation to uphold. Yet, as she advanced towards the next obstacle, nothing could have peeled my eyes from the screen.

We all know that gender roles in fitness and sports are very clear: there are some activities that are socially accepted as being masculine or feminine, such as baseball and softball, while others are considered neutral, like swimming and tennis (Schmalz 538-539). When we are honest with ourselves, we know that even the neutral sports, which men and women more or less equally participate in, pique our interest more so when men compete than when women do. It appears, at a glance, that sports are dominated by men.

How did we get to this point, where we are servants to the notion of sport as a male area of expertise? Without realizing it, this idea is engrained in our heads well before we are old enough to take a stab at an *American Ninja Warrior* course. Knowing that the way gender roles are presented in the media had already been thoroughly researched, Emily Roper and Alexandra Clifton turned to children's books as a way to understand how we view women in sports, specifically in books that portray a female-athlete as a main character. Studying ten of these books, none based on factual events, several things become apparent. First, father figures, in most of the books, played the lead role of encouragement in their daughters' athletic endeavors, many also acting in a participatory role (Roper). Even though the main character participating in the sport was a girl, it was implied that such skills could not be learned from anyone but a man. Additionally, in three of these books, the female athletes are compared to their male counterparts, with the males as the standard for the females to continue working towards (Roper). Collectively, this paints a picture to our youth that women can participate in sports, but they need to find men to emulate and learn from if they want any measure of success. Furthermore, success might not be as big of an accomplishment if it is only over other women. It would seem that the expectations society sets for female athletes at a young age offer little variance from what persists leading up to and throughout adulthood.

With men understood to be the gatekeepers of the sporting universe, are our expectations for gender in sports beyond our control? While the sports we choose to participate in seem to be our choice, the ones we have available to choose from appear to be given to us by society. Schmalz's idea that "social norms dictate that men are expected to possess masculine characteristics and women are expected to possess feminine characteristics" (538) has become so engrained in our minds that we can't ignore when a girl makes the high school football team or when a guy tells you he is a cheerleader. It makes us feel good to tell the world that we are in favor of equality in all things, including sports, but we find ourselves surprised and intrigued every time we learn of such instances of violated gender roles.

What are we telling society when we choose to go against what we're told we should do in sports? Schmalz tells us the type of leisure or exercise one engages in is used as a means of communicating personal information to others (Schmalz 538). This is to say that in choosing to do a particular sport or activity, we are telling everyone around us something about ourselves; for example, a male quarterback for a high school football team would signify one's status as masculine. Schmalz goes on to say the risk associated with violating the type of exercise assigned to one's own gender is being assigned negative stereotypes (Schmalz 538). Now imagine the quarterback is female. How does that change the perception and status of the individual? These negative stereotypes are given by everyone, consciously or not. If you, incorrectly, disagree with that idea, explain why my entire class roared with laughter upon learning I, a bulky, bearded, Marine Corps veteran, would be attending a Zumba class as a boundary-pushing experience for a writing assignment. This wouldn't be the last instance of shaming prior to my actually stepping onto the hardwood dance floor.

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I attended my Zumba class at Henderson Hall, a Marine Corps base, in Arlington, Virginia. Unable to locate where the class was being taught, I went to the front desk at the gym and asked the gentleman behind the counter for help. "Did you say Zumba," he asked, not hiding an ounce of

judgment. I told him that was correct. Giving me a look of confusion, he pointed behind me and explained where I needed to go. Is it possible that, at 6'1", 220 pounds, I don't look like the typical Zumba student?

Having found the tiny dance room, the next hour consisted of my seven newest friends and me dancing to high-intensity music. Well, the seven women in the class were dancing; I was desperately trying to imitate the movements around me without falling flat on my face. Maria, the military wife next to me, told me that if I just kept counting to four with the music and timed all of my dance moves with it that I would do fine. The instructor sneaking looks at me in the mirror and stifling laughter while shaking her head confirmed what I thought: I looked ridiculous.

At the end of class, a few of the women took the time to introduce themselves before leaving. Every conversation, regardless of how it started or ended, had me being asked, "What made you want to come to Zumba?" The stereotypes were being thrown at me left and right. Collegiate peers, facility supervisors, and participants of Zumba all unanimously agree: I'm not "supposed" to do Zumba.

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"And now, the Warped Wall, standing between her and history!" The crowd had calmed slightly, starting chants to support Kacy. Her boyfriend stood off to the side, giving her last minute advice as she stared down Goliath. "Six seasons of *American Ninja Warrior*, no woman has ever completed a qualifying course." With a deep breath and body language that screamed, *I've got this*, Kacy sprinted at the wall that towered over her, nearly three times her height.

Step – step – step – step, lean back, jump and extend!

"Oooh! Her fingers just grazed the top of the wall, missing by inches!" The crowd "Oooh'd" and "Aaah'd" as she stumbled back to the bottom to regroup.

Looking at her boyfriend, he said something inaudible, to which she nodded. As she squared back up to the Warped Wall, silence consumed the crowd.

As I watched Kacy prepare for a second attempt, I couldn't help but notice her boyfriend's presence was subtly being made significant. He stood off to the side, but was continually zoomed in on, clapping and cheering her on. JoEllen Vrazel, PhD, Ruth P. Saunders, PhD, and Sara Wilcox, PhD, all professors in the fields of Exercise Science and Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior, used 43 studies that "identify key social-environmental influences on the physical-activity behavior of women" (Vrazel 3) in order to figure out when adult women feel exercise and physical activities are acceptable, and why. What caught my eye, in regards to Kacy Catanzaro, was this: "Results from qualitative research revealed that women perceived acceptance for physical- activity behavior from spouses and significant others as a necessary and essential component for allowing them to take time to participate in physical activity" (Vrazel 7). Watching the entire video, we see a clear example of this, with Kacy looking to her boyfriend between almost every obstacle on the course. It is almost as if, as the researchers argue, she needs his approval in order to succeed. To emphasize this dynamic, we see the producers ensuring the cameras notice

him on the sidelines supporting her. Could the masses rally behind a woman if she didn't have her significant other's approval?

Step – step – step – step, lean back, jump and extend!

The hosts of *American Ninja Warrior*, along with the entire crowd, erupted as one. Matt Iseman, barely audible over the spectators, yelled, “YES! YES! SHE’S DONE IT! History has been made!” Kacy Catanzaro, former Division I Gymnast of the Year from Towson University, had firmly cemented herself in another sport, becoming the first woman to climb the Warped Wall and complete a qualifying course.

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“Now finishing the qualifying course was one thing, but she’ll have to get past four more incredibly difficult obstacles to complete this finals course,” Matt Iseman informs us. It was time for the regional finals to begin, where four additional obstacles are added on to the end of the original qualifying course. Kacy looks to her left, blows a kiss to her boyfriend, and the bell sounds for her to begin.

With the regional qualifiers completed and the regional finals in full swing, Kacy was no longer the only female ninja-hopeful in the media. Meagan Martin and Michelle Warnky both completed regional qualifiers as well. Comments such as, “The women have arrived,” dominated the commentators’ narrative. As many caught the *American Ninja Warrior* bug, thanks in part to the viral spread of Catanzaro’s efforts, my curiosity chased it. For the life of me, I could not figure out why we cared about it.

That is a lie. I had known all along why we cared. It’s shallow, but it’s simple. We were following Kacy Catanzaro and her friends because they were women, playing a man’s game. While we said to each other how great it would be to see one of them win, we knew in the back of our minds that it was only a matter of time until the men outlasted them. How did we know this to be true?

I watched, in depth, every one of Kacy, Meagan, and Michelle’s runs. In Kacy’s opening run, the Denver Qualifier, she takes 5:26 to finish the course. In that time, the announcers say “woman” or “women” ten times. They mention her gender every 32.6 seconds, on average. This is the episode that was made into a social media sensation, blazing across the internet like a California wildfire. Her performance was nowhere close to the best time, but we were constantly reminded she was a woman. After all, something had to make her interesting.

Kacy and Meagan ran three courses each: their respective regional qualifiers and finals, and the national final. Michelle only participated in the regional qualifier and final, so between the three of them, they ran eight courses. In a composite time of 31:19, the words “woman,” “women,” or “female” were used 60 times. That breaks down to a gender role being highlighted by commentators every 31.3 seconds, on average. Contrasted with a gender role only being used in the top five men’s runs every 87.8 seconds, on average, it becomes crystal clear that the interest with women is not how well they perform, so much as their presence in the competition. Hearing that women are competing, we get sucked in.

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Why are we pulled in by this, and why is it exciting to have women in the limelight? According to a 2013 study that looked into how gender roles and stereotypes in sports affect individuals, women account for forty percent of sports participation, whereas only five to eight percent of sports coverage is dedicated to women's sports (Chalabaev). This implies that we can't satiate our hunger for sports solely, or even mostly, with women's athletics. It is becoming increasingly clearer that women act as a side show in this male dominated arena, capable of attracting attention for short, unsustainable periods of time. Whereas Americans may watch most of the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, more commonly known as March Madness, the NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Game will gain only a fraction of the attention. Since women in sports don't have the media appeal that men have, the next step would be to see what kind of ratings jump Catanzaro generated.

In 2013, the fifth season, before Kacy was in the competition, *American Ninja Warrior* aired on Mondays, from 9-10PM ET, with ratings floating around

5.25 million viewers each week (Bibel). It is important to consider that, while Kacy and other women did participate in this season, none of them were able to produce any results worth highlighting. All the finishers were men and ratings were steady from the first episode to the last, never hitting more than 5.5 million viewers in an episode. The theme of all-male success varied little from the first four seasons, giving potential new viewers little to get hooked on.

In 2014, NBC made the decision to extend the show to a two-hour segment, airing Monday nights from 9-11PM ET (Bibel). Prior to Kacy Catanzaro's debut, the show's ratings started out around where they left off, at

5.15 million (Bibel). We were getting the same product as the previous season, and the same people were tuning in to watch it. Nothing was happening to bring in new viewers. Several episodes into the season, Kacy's qualifying run went viral and was being talked about by the masses. Her first episode created a surge in ratings, and by the end of the season, *American Ninja Warrior* was regularly being viewed by 6.1 to 6.5 million people (Bibel). Was the twenty percent increase in viewership because of her? The competition was, and still is, dominated by men, but, when the word got out that a woman was attempting the impossible, we tuned in to see how long she could hang with the men. Surely no one expected her to achieve total victory by completing all four stages at the national finals.

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"...and the amazing run of Kacy Catanzaro comes to an end at the Jumping Spider." The hosts barely sounded surprised, as Kacy pulled herself out of the water, having been unable to hold herself between the two vertical boards suspended mid-air. Their soft tone and calm demeanor sent the message that it was simply a matter of time; the women were expected to fail.

Everywhere we look, we see signs of gender roles dictating who should be doing what:

Girls going out for the football team. *Shouldn't they be trying out for the dance team? room?*

Men asking for directions to Zumba classes. *Don't they know we have a weight*

Jenn Brown, co-host on *American Ninja Warrior*, closed her final interview with Kacy Catanzaro after her failure to complete the National Finals course in Vegas with, "Well, I think I can speak for everybody, all the ninjas, and everybody at home, that we loved watching you run, and we cannot wait to see you back next year."

"I'll definitely be here."

As will America, Kacy.

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