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World Rugby's smaller ball proposal ignites debate on gender equality in sports

Theme:
Voice & Visibility

 World Rugby's smaller ball proposal ignites debate on gender equality in sports

Co-authored by Bonnie Jansen, NZ Herald

OPINION

On the week the Super Rugby Aupiki final showcased the remarkable talent and growth of female rugby players, an intriguing development emerged in the rugby world: World Rugby's contemplation of introducing a [smaller ball for the women's game](#).

This proposal has ignited a flurry of contrasting perspectives, highlighting the nuanced discussion surrounding gender equality and the evolution of the sport.

World Rugby's consideration of this proposal stems from the assertion that women's hands are on average 10 per cent smaller than men's, leading to trials using a slightly smaller and lighter ball. However, the proposal raises pertinent questions about its necessity and potential impact on the integrity of women's rugby.

But it seems to come when there's no substantial demand from players themselves. Is this proposed switch simply another attempt to undermine the integrity of women's rugby?

I can already envision the detractors: "Their records only stand because of the smaller ball... Their achievements aren't as legitimate because their ball is lighter."

While sports like basketball and cricket have undergone adjustments for female competitions in efforts to enhance entertainment and attract wider audiences, these alterations are compromising the integrity of the sport.

When Golden State Warrior Steph Curry narrowly defeated WNBA star [Sabrina Ionescu's](#) impressive score of 26 (that no man before Curry had beaten) in a three-point contest, TNT commentator Kenny Smith suggested that she should have shot from the women's line for a fairer contest.

Meanwhile, as [Caitlin Clark](#) and fellow women's college basketball players have smashed both women's and men's records, sexism and racism has intersected the success. In a line now removed from an LA Times author, he asked his readers about an upcoming UCLA-LSU game, "Do you prefer America's sweethearts or its dirty debutantes? Milk and cookies or Louisiana hot sauce?"

Another example that women can't excel without strings attached is in cricket circles. *Business Standard* reported there is talk of aligning women's rules with the men's due to an increase in boundary hits resulting from smaller grounds and a lighter ball. It follows Shafali Verma's remarkable six, a 91-metre shot off Ashleigh Gardner's delivery during this year's Women's Premier League, setting a new distance record.

Let's be honest the notion of a slightly smaller ball is appealing. Fewer dropped balls, improved conversion rates and accuracy in place kicks could help grow the viewership, investment and opportunity.

But would a significant change, such as altering the size of a ball, ultimately aid or impede a sport striving for expansion?

Female athletes excel on level playing fields, proving that success knows no gender-specific dimensions. At the 2023 Fifa Women's World Cup, matches were played on standard-sized pitches with the same-sized ball as men's, resulting in a revenue of over \$570 million. In professional golf, women's courses mirror men's, yet it doesn't stop Kiwi golfer [Lydia Ko from winning 20 career LPGA victories](#) and counting.


It was also demonstrated by the [Blues women in Auckland on Saturday night](#) who gave the fans a thrilling final as they secured their inaugural Super Rugby Aupiki title rallying with three late tries to defeat Chiefs Manawa 24-18.

But frankly, at the coal face of this argument, it's the players who should rightfully have the authority and final say in its direction. After all, it's their profession, their passion.

It seems unjust for a group of World Rugby executives dominated by male members, to dictate the future of a sport they may not intimately understand.

[Bonnie Jansen](#) is a multimedia journalist in the NZME sports team. She's a football commentator, passionate about women's sport and was part of the Te Rito cadetship scheme before becoming a fulltime journalist.

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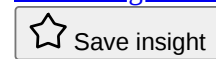
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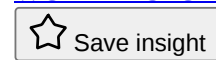


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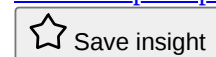


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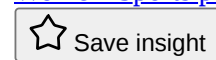


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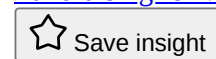


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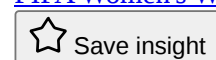


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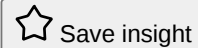
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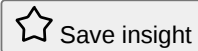
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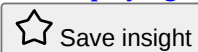
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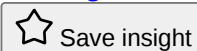
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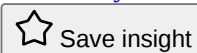
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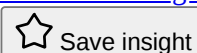
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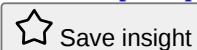
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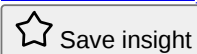
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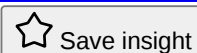
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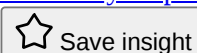
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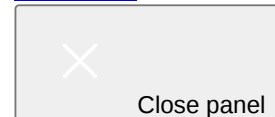
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