The Olympics are again upon us, and Australia has some excellent and prominent women athletes. Stephanie Rice, Sally Pearson and Anna Meares, for example, are all at the top of their game and likely to do well. I wonder, though, if women’s Olympic sport will receive a similar amount of news coverage as men’s. I wonder this because very little sports news is ever about women’s sport.

I am a lecturer and this last semester I gave the students in my sociology of sport class an assignment that asked them to choose a local newspaper and analyse its sports coverage by gender. They had to count the number of articles on women’s, men’s and other types of sport and measure the amount of space devoted to each category. Now it’s clear when glancing at sport sections that there is very little women’s sport coverage. But I was still surprised when student after student reported that less than 5% of the space or articles were on women’s sport and more than 90% were on men’s regardless of which newspaper or day of the week. One student noted that there was more coverage of horseracing than women’s sport in the media they analysed.

Why is there so little women’s sport news? As a society we have over time structured sports such that men’s sports are dominant and favoured. Until recently, women were actively discouraged from participating in sport, but we’ve had professional men’s sport for centuries. It’s hard for women’s sport to get a look in. Sport is really important in Australian society. It is big business with lots of players, fans, brands, and money. But the sports considered to be important and well-funded sports are those played by men.

We all know that women play sports, but we often don’t care to know more. Although women’s sport is intrinsically no less entertaining than men’s, few of us attend and the advertisers are far between. In another assignment one of my students found that the only advertisers during a televised professional netball match were team or league sponsors. There is obviously a common perception that women’s sport is not of interest to the broader public.

So there is reason for concern about women’s Olympic coverage because there is so little women’s sport coverage in general. The consequence of this lack of attention is that it maintains the subordinate position of women’s sport. Nobody covers it because of the perception that nobody is interested because nobody covers it, and around we go.

But perhaps the Olympics is different. Olympic sport is elite but largely amateur. We love our Olympians. Women have always been involved. So maybe the dynamics are different and women Olympians will be highlighted and their achievements prominently discussed. Up to now, in the preliminary weeks before the Olympics, there have been some feature articles on women Olympians, but little actual sports news. Hopefully that will change once the Olympics actually start, but I must admit that I am sceptical.