

I've witnessed harassment in the NFL for four decades. Last week, we learned how far we still have to go

By **Lesley Visser** Globe correspondent, Updated July 21, 2020, 12:34 p.m.



Lesley Visser of CBS Sports, shown in 2008, was a sports writer at the Boston Globe for 12 years. MATT SAYLES/A-SAYLES VIA AP

John Madden used to tell me I was caught in a “2-way go.”

As the first woman to cover the NFL as a beat — in 1976 for the Boston Globe — there were no provisions for equality. The locker rooms were closed until the early 1980s, which meant that in rain or snow, I’d have to wait in parking lots after games to

interview players.

This proved difficult on many levels. If I asked Steve Grogan to stop and talk, I'd miss Terry Bradshaw getting on the bus. If a player were exhausted, he'd hurry to his car. I didn't want to tell the Globe about this juggling act, in case they said a woman couldn't do it, and I didn't want to complain to the Patriots, in case they might agree.

That's why Madden said I was caught in a "2-way go," which is NFL-speak for a type of route for a wide receiver. The cornerback has to react to which way he thinks the receiver will go, with no help from anyone.

The credentials I wore, with no irony, said, "No Women or Children in the Press Box." Without a ladies room in said press box, I'd have to take the elevator down and sprint across the field like Usain Bolt to find the public restroom and try to get back before the Patriots punted.

ADVERTISING



Ads by Teads

One of the reasons I got the assignment at all was because the late, great Will

McDonough called then-Patriots owner Billy Sullivan and said, “We’re having a woman on the beat and that’s that.” Click.



Lesley Visser is shown covering Patriots training camp in 1976, her first year on the beat. She wasn't allowed into locker rooms that season, so she had to do her interviews from the parking lot. FRANK O'BRIEN/GLOBE FILE

Having seen so many positive changes in the NFL the past 45 years, it was deeply discouraging to read about the 15 women who came forward last week detailing sexual harassment while working for the Washington Redskins. According to [the report in the Washington Post](#), the allegations ranged from “unwelcome overtures or comments of a sexual nature” to “exhortations to wear revealing clothing and flirt with clients to close sales deals.”

Owner Dan Snyder, in the middle of a long-overdue name change for the team, said he’d welcome an outside investigation. Mark Cuban, the progressive owner of the Dallas

Mavericks, dealt with a similar issue more than two years ago. He acknowledged that he still feels remorse and responsibility. His advice to Snyder was to “accept the mistakes you made.”

Cuban added, “It’s painful, but it’s the only way it will get resolved.”

I feel blessed that no one from the Globe, not sports editors Dave Smith or Vince Doria or any of the writers, pressured me in any way. It was more a climate of pick-up basketball than pick-up at the bar. But I had plenty of harassment and dismissal from players and coaches.

At training camp, I ventured my first question to coach Chuck Fairbanks. He looked at me like Vulcan, the Roman god of fire. “What?” he said. I repeated my question about a linebacker. Fairbanks narrowed his eyes and said, “Why don’t you go to lunch with my daughter? You’re about the same age.”

Women in the business can have all three elements needed to succeed — knowledge, passion, and stamina — but no one prepares you for humiliation.

The culture was changing — not just for me, but for players, coaches, owners, and readers. We were all doing the two-step. When someone crossed the line, I tried humor as a default mechanism. I’d say, “Now, your mother didn’t teach you to talk like that.” Sometimes it was funny.

Anyone remember Bert Jones? A legend out of LSU, he was following iconic Johnny Unitas as quarterback for the Baltimore Colts. After a game in Foxborough against the Patriots, he asked me if I’d like to come to Baltimore. He offered to send me a round-trip ticket. I went into my Gloria Steinem routine, “Absolutely not! This is my job!” He finally cut me off with a laugh and said, “Hey, you’re not that great anyway.”



Lesley Visser became the first woman honored by the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006 when she won the Pete Rozelle Radio-Television Award. COURTESY/PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME

One baseball player tried to turn me against the other reporters. After an Atlanta Braves playoff game, Dale Murphy, the celebrated All-Star, announced, “If she comes into the clubhouse, I won’t talk to anyone.” God bless Peter Gammons of the Globe and Dave Anderson of the New York Times, who waited outside with me. But I felt like rot.

It was a roller coaster, with the understanding that there is no perfect human behavior. There will always be testosterone in the workplace — androgen and estrogen. Society is a work in progress. For women in sports journalism, it’s moved both forward and back.

In 1985, [Christine Brennan](#) was the first woman to cover the Redskins for the Washington Post. She earned tremendous respect with her intelligence and careful listening. Five years later, three Patriots were fined for their part in the incident involving Boston Herald reporter Lisa Olson. Harassment needs to be met with policy and resolve, and it must match the modern standard.

There is still wreckage to be examined, as evidenced by the claims of the women in

Washington, who said their experiences ruined their dreams of working in sports.

Nothing makes me sadder.

I was 10 when I told my mother that I wanted to be a sportswriter. She didn't say, "Oh, honey, girls don't do that." She said, "That's great; sometimes you have to cross when it says, 'Don't Walk.' "

Born in Boston, I grew up listening to Curt Gowdy call Red Sox games on my cheap transistor radio and I went to my only NFL game in 1964 when the Patriots played the Raiders in Fenway Park. I didn't see the hurdles, only the excitement.

It's crucial that dreams don't die in a toxic workplace. Despite what many think, there aren't that many women working in sports, and very few in positions of power. When I covered the Patriots more than 40 years ago, the Black players were the best to me. Sugar Bear Hamilton and Tony McGee would spend late afternoons going over tape, patiently explaining the defense. One time I asked Sugar Bear why they were so considerate.

"Because we know what it's like," he said, "to be the only one."

Lesley Visser, the first woman enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, wrote for the Boston Globe for 12 years and is currently with CBS Sports. This year, she became the first woman to win the Lifetime Achievement Sports Emmy.

[Show 87 comments](#)