

INTERVIEW WITH ROMY TITUS

AUGUST 2013

NOTE: At the time of this interview, in August 2013, Romy Titus was a broadcaster with the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Prior to that, she covered soccer for Supersport International in South Africa. She has more than a decade of experience as a television journalist, covering news and sports.

1. How did you get interested in covering sports? Were you encouraged by any family members or friends to pursue this career?

Sport was for boys, really. To be honest, there was not much encouragement from my family members to pursue a career where men prevailed. I guess I was taught the common things girls are taught: Play with dolls, cook, clean and to be a lady. I always enjoyed sport. At school I played water-polo and tennis and travelled the country doing that when at high-school playing provincially. My granddad was a boxer, and I was always interested in what happened in the ring and when I eventually found a trainer to teach me how to box, my parents thought it was the funniest thing for me to think I could be the next Laila Ali. To be honest, I thought I was silly, too.

2. Why do you enjoy covering sports? What, specifically, do you enjoy the most?

I studied Journalism and with South Africa's crime rate, I felt it my duty to be at the front line of serious crimes. I felt I needed to be the voice that linked the outside world to the public. I have covered child rape, murder, suicide, politics -- you name it, I've been at the forefront of it. I then moved into sport when an ex-colleague headed up at sports division at the South African Broadcasting Corporation in 2005 -- and although I was drenched in hard news only -- he said to me that he saw my future in sport and that I should start reading the newspaper from back to front. I enjoy the fun aspect, the packed stadiums, the sometimes horrid noise of the vuvuzelas in the stadium and the passion South Africans have for sport and especially soccer. There's a sense of unity and for me standing touchline staring back at 95,000 people -- all races and from all walks of life who have packed a stadium for the biggest derby (Orlando Pirates play Kaizer Chiefs) -- makes me think of how far my country has come from the days of Apartheid. Sport has a fun element to it, after delivering the bad news of crime, sport has a winner and a loser and I far enjoy delivering that news than the hard news. It's also a whole lot less to do with emotionally and personally. Sport now flows through my veins.

3. How often do you encounter other women doing the same kind of work as you? Is it common to see other women covering sports?

In South Africa the amount of women in sport is still few and far between, but its growing slowly. There is a nice concentration of women in the sports arena and across most pro sports, and I could probably count on one hand the women who are credible, respected and followed. I think there is the perception that women in sport are 'easy,' for a lack of a better word because we work in a male-dominated industry. I think there is also the notion that to get into broadcasting, sport would be the answer because all you would need is a pretty face, and the job is yours. It's hard work and not for the faint-hearted, but slowly more and more women are coming into the fold, and it's great to see. I do wish that the profession would be taken seriously and not watered down with the notion that you don't need to know the game, you just have to have a pretty pout!

4. Why do you think there are so few women covering sports in South Africa?

I guess it's just not a place for a woman. I really think that is the reason. Women are only starting to come out of their shell now and stand up and have a voice and defy the odds. Women in traditional South Africa should not have an opinion, should have a secretarial job, should be at home pregnant and in the kitchen cooking and looking after their families. I'm not saying that everyone's outlook is this, but perhaps as women we've also just lived up to the stereotype of what we should be instead of us being who we want to be. Some women are lucky in the sense that they had opportunities to engage in sport and have the freedom to do what they want. Perhaps it's the younger generation who have this choice, and as they grow up and graduate it will be easier for them to find jobs in sport, but my generation, I think, are only starting to come alive now and follow our dreams.

5. Do you think that your status as a woman in a male-dominated field brings you any advantages? (If so, what are they? If not, why not?)

I do think so... At times my male counterparts would pose certain questions and they would get no answers – and when I ask the question and perhaps phrase it differently I would get an answer. I'm very aware of this and use it to my advantage. After all we're dealing with the male ego. Men, I think, have a softer side when it comes to women and sometimes it works and other days it does not. A coach who has won a match is the most pleasant person to interview, and you can dig on past topics which were not covered and get great answers, a coach who just lost a game is like a bear with a sore tooth... For me in the field it's all about understanding the person, their mood and having a good professional working relationship. All of this should swing in ones favour, whether you're a woman or not.

6. What are the challenges you face as a woman in this field? Can you provide an example of the way these challenges impact your ability to do your job?

Muti (traditional medicine made from herbs which is obtained from a Sangoma or a Witch doctor) is used by most teams, and it's believed that this muti will make the team win games and they sprinkle it secretly on the pitch during pitch inspection or warm ups, but it's also believed that a woman on her menstrual cycle or a woman who comes close to the muti while it is being used would cancel out the effects. Because of this practice at times I'm prevented from going onto the field, walking on the field or going near the said team's dug out as I would cancel out the muti and it won't work. So, security often keep me off the pitch and on the outskirts of the field, which means that I cannot do my job and I arrive at my station late. When I started presenting from touchline this was a big problem. Muti is still being used, but the Premier Soccer League has ensured that we can all live happily ever after – with the team being able to do what they do and us women reporters getting to our posts on time. It's not smooth sailing, but it definitely is getting better. Sometimes there are also no available women's bathrooms, and this is just a lack of planning. Because men are mostly on the sports beat, many think that men will be the only ones needing the bathroom, and just from a lack of forward thinking the female bathrooms would be locked ... But these days I make myself at home in the male bathrooms. I feel taking a stand and using the male bathrooms, and it being reported would raise the flag for the next time, when the caretaker and the respective [employees] would ensure that both male and female bathrooms are unlocked.

7. When you talk to women who want to follow your path in South Africa, what advice do you give them?

Study! If you want to pursue journalism and you want to venture into broadcasting, then study, study, study, so that you have the foundation and groundwork to fall back on. I always feel that the females who do approach me see fame and fortune -- and my job is far from that. There really is no glamour in not being able to use toilet facilities or to wait 'til the muti has taken effect when your male colleagues are at their posts ready for action. I think they see the TV aspect, and that is what they want to do, be 'famous.' There are few who are serious about the profession and have great ideas and plans on their futures, but the most important advice I can give is have a love for what you want to do, don't be fooled by what you see and pay your dues, STUDY!

8. What needs to happen to change the status of women in sports broadcasting and journalism in South Africa?

Men's attitudes need to change. In the industry in South Africa it's men who sit at the top in the executive positions making decisions on which women will be hired or go to a game or who will present. At times I do feel we're judged by the way we look and not by the ability we have to deliver the best on the sport that we specialize in, and this at times makes me very weary of where I'm heading as a journalist, the older I get. There will always be someone younger, prettier and smarter, and in South Africa, I'm afraid we don't have examples like [US broadcaster] Lesley Visser, who has been in the industry for years and respected. Here we come and go.... Recently on one of the country's top watched sports shows, a female presenter was chosen, based on her looks and the amount of Twitter followers she has, to co-host a sports show. Her mandate is to wear revealing dresses, and the male executives who hired her believe that this is what the average male who loves sports wants to see. The fact that sport was not her passion was glaring.

9. Do you ever cover female athletes or women's sports? How would you describe the visibility of female athletes in South Africa?

I go to town each time I have to profile a female athlete. On the radio show, where I deliver sports news (The Collective on 2000FM), I have a feature each Tuesday called 'Women In Sport' to showcase female athletes who are not given the platform as much as the men. The feature covers both athletes and women behind the scenes in all sports. Often retired athletes are used on television as presenters and analysts. Not all female athletes are given the same amount of attention. It all depends on what they have won or how successful they've been for them to get the attention, coverage or endorsements.

10. What do you think needs to happen for the visibility of female athletes to improve? Are you optimistic?

Corporate South Africa need to believe in their ability. I find that only once a female athlete comes back from Olympics, Commonwealth Games, etc., with a medal -- do sponsors stand up and take notice. Bridget Hartley was an example who went to the Olympics and came back with a bronze medal for rowing. No one really took notice until her win, and on her arrival back home there was a flood of sponsors lined up to attach their logo to her name. I wish it was the other way around, that someone had the belief in her prior to the win, and if that happened their brand would have had greater mileage. Sadly, this is not the case.