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Gender, Sexuality and Sport

BY KYLA BREMNER

Cet article est une réflexion sur la nature et les objectifs du sport chez les athlètes et les spectateurs, femmes et hommes. L'auteure soutient que l'éducation et la compréhension du public en général ont eu un effet positif sur l'accessibilité des sports aux femmes et aux autres athlètes marginalisées, mais elle ajoute qu'il faut d'autres changements afin d'assurer une culture sportive moins discriminatoire et partant, plus égalitaire.

I chose to write about gender and sport because of a personal interest derived from my involvement as a woman in the very male-dominated sport of wrestling. Yet throughout the process of formulating a specific topic and preliminary research, I was adamant that I would not use my own experiences in the sporting world in my discussion of whether or not the culture of sports reinforces or subverts gender stereotypes. However, while reading much of the research and theory surrounding the topic, I invariably tended to drift off into reassessments of many infuriating or confusing incidents related to my status as a female wrestler in which I was involved or directly witnessed. Eventually it became clear to me that I could not “objectively” distance myself from a topic with which I was intimately concerned. Thus, writing from within feminist standpoint theory and following in the footsteps of Helen Lenskyj (1995), I will begin by identifying myself as an able-bodied white middle class heterosexual feminist, and a wrestler. Subsequently, I will apply theories on gender and sexuality in sport to certain experiences as both a

female and an athlete in an analysis the complex interrelationships between gender, sexuality, and the dominant paradigms of sporting culture.

Biological determinism and gender division in sports

Sports are structured along a gender divide: men compete against men, women against women. This bipolar division in athletics is justified by what Mary Jo Kane refers to as the “muscle gap,” an ideological construct referring to gender differences in athletic performance. The popular notion that

“men are just “naturally” stronger/more aggressive/tougher than women,” therefore have greater potential, is reinforced by and celebrated in patriarchal sporting culture (Therberge). This idea of relative lack of strength or endurance is a common manifestation reflected in “easier” rules for women in many sports, such as the fewer sets played by women in a tennis match or the no body-checking rule in women’s ice hockey.

As many 1970s radical feminist theorists “located the source of female subordination in the female body” (Jaggar 81), women’s perceived physical difference due to reproductive capabilities and essential lack of strength compared to men is only beginning to be refuted by feminist sociologists such as Kane and Therberge. Kane challenges this binary division of men and women’s physical capabilities based on sex, and proposes the conceptualisation of sport as a continuum in which the performances and abilities of individual men and women vary and overlap. This is not to say that at an elite level men do not outperform women in most disciplines; it is only to comment that the large majority of sporting bodies, both male and female, compete with a large range of skill and ability, and that in many recreational leagues there is no reasonable justification for dividing athletes on the basis of sex.

Nikki Wedgwood articulates this point in relation to squash divisions in Western Australia where men and women do not formally compete against each other. When recreationally matched, A-grade women were paired with B-grade men, and never A-grade men. As she points out, “If A equals A in one instance but A also equals B in another instance, then what does A equal?” (46). Obviously a male A is better than a female A. She also suggests that the refusal to pit a top woman against a top man led to a risk that the man might be beaten (something not unlikely in a sport such as squash where skill and experience are probably more important than strength), creating a situation which would threaten the importance of the concept of the muscle gap.

I have also experienced enforced and irrational gender segregation at a New South Wales (NSW) regional wrestling tournament. Very few women or girls attended this particular competition, and as a result I requested that I be allowed to enter in the equivalent male weight division. It did not seem to matter that as a nationally ranked wrestler I should be assumed to be at a higher skill level than

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regionally competing males and that any competition experience is valuable for wrestlers: my sex outweighed any other considerations. My request was denied, seemingly on the grounds that I could get hurt by the "stronger" males (although I train exclusively with males at the *AIS* and wrestling is a weight class sport so competitors are the same size), or (more importantly) it was implied that it would be too damaging for the male self-esteem to be beaten by a woman. The past situation where the professional tennis association refused to allow Venus Williams to enter the men's division of a pro circuit tennis tournament also follows along these lines: the administration and male tennis players argued that she would be uncompetitive against men but would not let that assumption be proven, perhaps because of the "risk" that she might prove them wrong.

In NSW, women are also legally prevented from engaging in certain combative sports such as boxing and kickboxing. While such official restrictions are perhaps due to perceptions of female weakness, or a greater propensity to get hurt, this is also perhaps due to a perception of the sexual nature of females in combative sports. When I first mention that I am a wrestler to some people, many admit that (apart from WWF) what comes to mind is bikini mud or jello wrestling. Graham Scambler and Maggie Jennings have written that "female:female and female:male combat ... is a genre best located on the periphery of the sex industry" (417). Such misinformed comments merely reflect public representations of women who spar rather than the reality of the large body of female combatants who train and practice alongside and equivalently to men in gyms all over the state. Fortunately, change has begun to occur internationally, with boxing now the only remaining all-male Olympic sport, a status that may indeed change in the foreseeable future.

Michael Messner (1990), among others, describes how enforced division of the sexes reinforces ideas of masculine superiority in sports and a "hegemonic masculinity" in sporting culture. As in wider society, hegemonic masculinity is constructed in a manner that makes its power appear natural and normal.

The importance of sport in constructing masculinities

As a result of advances in women's equality in other areas

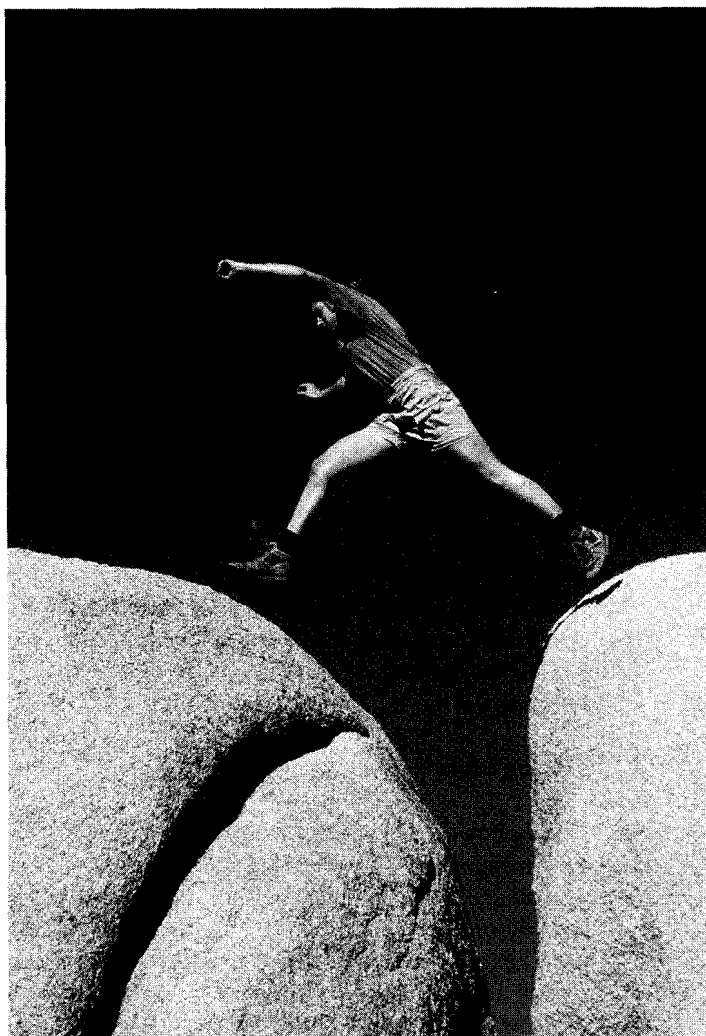


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of society over the past century, Messner (1988) argues that a crisis of masculinity emerged, causing men to use sport to validate their masculinity and highlight their physical dominance over women. It must also be noted that men's sport was assigned a socially constructed value that elevated its status in relation to the achievements of women (Bryson). According to Bob Connell, there emerged three main categories of masculinity: hegemonic, conservative, and subordinated; all three are constructed in relation to one another as well as to women. Subordinated masculinities, such as those of gay men, are restricted by the legitimation of their violent oppression by the dominant masculinity (cited in Yeats). Helen Yeats argues that media representations of all-male sports such as professional rugby league "depict and glorify a defiant, unreconstructed form of masculinity, the kind of tough, hegemonic masculinity that brooks no opposition to the celebration of male supremacy through the aggressive body-in-action" (38), and that "such a rampant affirma-

tion and framing in the sporting media of a dominant gender naturalizes misogyny and homophobia” (Yeats 38). Thus an acceptance of women or openly gay men by this sporting culture would contradict the assumption that traits such as aggression, strength, and competitiveness are essential expressions of the heterosexual masculinity.

The sexualization of many women athletes is problematic in that “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich) has “shaped female sport experience, specifically by classifying physical activities as ‘feminine’, and therefore appropriate for females, only when they were seen to enhance heterosexual attractiveness” (Lenskyj 1990: 236). In this light, sports that enhance “feminine” qualities such as gracefulness, expressiveness, and flexibility such as gymnastics, synchronised swimming, and figure skating are deemed appropriate for women (and conversely inappropriate for men [Adams]). Women who choose sports that are more “masculine” are described as either: “A: looking for a guy, B: there because her guy is there, or C: trying to be ‘one of the guys!’” (Anderson 72). If women aren’t involved in sport because of their heterosexual interest, “they are constructed as women who want to be men” (Anderson 72), a statement that carries with it a heavy insinuation of lesbianism.

Homophobia in sporting cultures

Homophobia is a tactic used to discourage many women from many sports. As well, it results in the enforcement of a “feminine image” by many coaches, administrators and sponsors of many women’s leagues (Lenskyj 1994; Cahn), or an often subconscious self-enforcement by the athlete herself. Lenskyj (1994) describes a Canadian women’s volleyball coach who required all “his” players to grow their hair long and wear ponytails with ribbons; self-enforcement grotesquely manifested itself in the claw-like nails and brightly coloured spandex costumes of American

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track and field star Jackie Joyner-Kersey. This “hyperfemininity” is used to reassert heterosexuality in reaction to the “hypermasculinity” of the dominant male sporting paradigms and the culture of homophobia they create. Women who do not “perform gender” as Judith Butler describes risk being expelled from teams, losing sponsorship, or being generally ostracised by the sporting community. A personal example of this is my male team-mates’ collective refusal (and the coach’s condoning of it) to spar with me until I shaved my legs, as well as their extreme vocal disapproval (and

perhaps “suspicion”) when I shaved my head.

Brian Pronger argues that the patriarchal heterosexual significance of masculinity can have a special meaning for gay men, and gay male athletes in particular. Heterosexual promiscuity, and the misogynistic locker room discussion of it, is a feature of sporting culture that is used to reinforce images of heterosexuality. (While this is often a useful strategy for men, it can often backfire against women and result in their male and female team-mates’ disapproval as being incompatible with the idealised “chaste” female.) Pronger claims that gay men are able to have closer and more equal relationships with female friend because the masculine/feminine dynamic is not sexually relevant to them and thus they are able to remove themselves from it. Because of this distancing from hegemonic masculinity, “for many gay men, masculinity and femininity cease to be experienced as what one *is*, and they become, quite consciously, ways in which one *acts*” (Pronger 145); gay men experience a “fluidity” of gender between gayness and straightness according to the social situation. This is made possible by the assumption that all men are heterosexual which enables most gay men to “pass” as straight, something that is often necessary for gay male athletes.

Pronger argues that this awareness of gender roles puts the gay male in a position as an outsider or observer in many situations of reinforcement of heterosexual identity, such as those performed in the locker room. “This position of the observer is an ironic stance” (149). For example, a gay man might find it ironic that being both gay and a successful athlete presents a contradiction in traditional stereotypes: “the popular images of the athlete and the gay man are virtually antithetical” (Pronger 149). This is not the case for the lesbian where her involvement in sports alone casts her under sexual suspicion. As well, women do not reinforce hegemonic behaviours to the same degree as male athletes, although the lesbian may have her own ironic gaze in viewing a performance of femininity to which she does not feel connected. The ironic gay sensibility is a tool for a reinterpretation or redefinition of social events; there is definitely irony in a locker room situation where heterosexuality and homophobia are being reinforced, so that the gay male may be aware of a very homoerotic charge in the room full of naked, muscular male bodies. Therefore, while sports are a site of hegemonic gender reinforcement, they may also provide a useful site from which the ironic gay standpoint can be used to deconstruct and redefine meanings of gender.

The commodification of the sporting body

Toby Miller also highlights the problematisation of hegemonic masculinity and the commodification of the male body and male athletics in general (see also Yeats). Miller claims that, “Sport allows men to watch and dissect other men’s bodies—a legitimate space for gazing at the male form without homosexuality being alleged or feared”

(435). He also claims that the pleasure men derive from gazing at other men has led to a sexual colonisation of men reminiscent of the way men have historically sexually colonised women. Despite the sporting arena as a bastion for homophobia, Miller points out that when money is involved, the rules change. "So in the mid-1980s, the Sydney Swans Australian Rules Club self-consciously marketed itself to the gay community, hiring a public relations firm that designed form-hugging shorts for full-forward Warwick Capper" (436). Advertising trends in the past decade have started to shift towards catering to the lucrative dual income no children market of gay couples and this has led to a representation of male sporting bodies accordingly. He suggests that the acceptance of gay Rugby League prop Ian Roberts rides on the wake of this commodification.

Miller points out the recent change of climate toward gays due to their capitalistic power has enabled top gay athletes to come out of the closet, further challenging the gender and sexual stereotypes of male athletes. In addition to Ian Roberts, he uses Dennis Rodman as an example of a sportsman confronting gender boundaries as a commercial (as well as athletic) venture. Rodman has marketed his image as a sexual being: wearing boas and dating Madonna don't do much to reduce his media presence. Thus by behaving "outrageously," Rodman is ensuring his public recognition, thus marketability as a commodity. Interestingly enough, he also uses his refusal to identify with a category of sexuality such as gay or straight to his advantage on the court.

Further complexities flow from the way he uses queer talk to trash opponents—most notoriously asking them for dates during games and drawing fouls from their hysterical reactions. This refusal to be gay, straight, or bisexual asks us to think again about tight definitions of personhood in terms of sexual practice: Rodman might fuck a guy or he might not, but he would still be the best defensive rebounder in the history of the NBA. (Rodman cited in Miller 440)

Thus, while sporting venues are a stronghold for hegemonic masculinity, the inflexibility of this masculine image also casts these venues as a very effective arena for queer resistance and gender confrontation. The huge sums of money involved in marketing male sports also ensure that elite gay athletes will not be dropped from the team, and that marketers will take into account the potential revenue gained by targeting lucrative gay markets.

Unfortunately the marketing of female sports is also targeted to a male audience, which also requires a sexualisation of the female bodies under a male gaze. Perceived "image problems" haunt female sports: media focus on an athlete's attractiveness rather than her achievements. This phenomenon is most recognizable in relation to Anna Kournikova, who, while never having won a sanctioned

pro tournament, is by far the highest paid female tennis player due to the marketability of her sexual appeal. Sadly, in wrestling, the "Miss Lutte" crown is still awarded to the "prettiest wrestler" at the World Championships each year. This is insulting to the winners of the tournament in that it lets them know that even though they are world champions, they are still lacking if they're ugly. It also presents the disconcerting knowledge to every female wrestler that while on the mat they are explicitly being judged by the all-male wrestling administration for their ability to incite sexual desire. It is truly a shame that female wrestlers are entered into such a pageant without their consent, and without the choice to remove themselves from the contest.

Furthermore, sports are presented as of less importance to a female athlete's personal identification than they are for a male's. In the media, a "milestone" for a female athlete is often not a record broken but a marriage or birth of a child (Burroughs, Seebom, and Ashburn). The media also presents biographies of female athletes that emphasise an interest in "feminine" pursuits outside of sport such as homemaking or (heterosexual) dancing (Burroughs *et al.*). This rampant homophobia fuels the sexualisation and devaluation of women's sports (and women) discussed above and as found in articles such as that of Robert Messenger. As Lenskyj points out, "female athletes of all sexual orientations suffer the negative effects of sexism, heterosexism and homophobia" (Lenskyj 1995: 53) in the media.

The reaction to and redefinition of sporting cultures

While sports culture is a bastion of male domination that reinforces gender stereotypes and the construction of male/female as binary opposites, it is also an arena in which women (and homosexuals and paraolympians and racial minorities, etc.) can confront these stereotypes by actively demonstrating their physical ability. Historically, the most successful demonstration of this in terms of male-female difference was performed by Billy Jean King when she defeated Bobby Riggs in the famous 1973 tennis "Battle of the Sexes". And while sprinters like Marion Jones do not run as fast as male 100 m sprinting counterparts, most men cannot deny that Jones undoubtedly runs faster than they can. Obviously, the flip side of such an observation is that women cannot be the best since, although they may be better than 99.9 per cent of men at a given sport, there will always be men who are better.

Lenskyj (1994) advocates the re-vamping of the sporting ethos so that

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it is less celebrating aggressiveness and competitiveness and more focused on recreation, health, and inclusivity. She uses the example of an all-women's lesbian-centred "fun" softball league. However, from my point of view, competitiveness, strength, and intensive training, although considered "masculine" values, can be very important (and enjoyable) attributes of sport. It is also much more difficult to practice sports such as wrestling on a "recreational" basis; it is by nature very physical and competitive; those are the aspects of wrestling that I enjoy. I do not believe I would gain the same level of enjoyment playing some sports in a non-elite, non-competitive setting. There is a unique pleasure to be gained from pushing the limits of skill and performance which only elite competition can give, and for many, that "pursuit of excellence" is one of the primary goals of sport.

Where I do agree with Lenskyj is that sports do not need to celebrate violence, a "masculine" trait used to enforce the subordination of other masculinities and women. Scambler and Jennings claim that "sports such as...wrestling that have survived in modern Olympic Games are pale echoes of a more openly violent and less compromising past" (416). I dispute this observation: despite the focus on one-on-one contact, wrestling uses techniques of strength, power, and movement to score points and control the other wrestler, but any form of "violence," such as striking or holds which go against a joint and may injure are not permitted. In this context, wrestling has survived as the same sport for thousands of years; it has always been an aggressive, but never a life-threatening, endeavour.

Aggression is not necessarily a bad thing; it is not necessarily violence either. The feminist tendency to devalue aggression and competitiveness is something which I find problematic in that they can be important and valuable human attributes. They just need to be recontextualised away from "masculine" violence and re-entered into a vocabulary of "universal" human qualities. With the goal of a more egalitarian society in the future, we must learn to accept a wide range of values in a tolerant and accepting context of right to uninhibited personal choice. Hopefully the future of sport will be an affirmation of the joy of being alive in a human body, and an inclusive and diverse expression of physicality by an infinite number of composites of sexual, gender, racial, able-bodiedness, and class identities.

Where do we go from here?

From this analysis it is easy to see how sporting culture both subverts and reinforces common stereotypes of gender and sexuality. There are many examples of sport and sexuality or gender conflict which are not discussed here but also bring such issue to the forefront of public discussion. An excellent example that comes immediately to mind is the continued publication of nude calendars as a

method for athletes to raise funds. It must be recognised that from the first of these publications and the latest, public perception of the nature and scandal of such representations have mellowed. Because culture and cultural identities are fluid and malleable, public perceptions and stereotypes are not set in stone, nor are practices and beliefs within sporting communities and bodies.

More shocking has been the recent revelations of sexual abuse of athletes, both male and female (but more often female) such as the sexual abuse of Canadian hockey player Sheldon Kennedy by his minor league coach, the long-term abuse suffered by Olga Korbut at the hands of her coach, and the repeated assaults on Valerie Kost, a former Australian female jockey by her male colleagues. Kost says she was raped and harassed by at least 19 men, youths and boys from the age of 11, when she entered the industry, until her retirement at 22 ("Former female jockey..."). Kost says that in one incident when she was 13, 33 years ago, she was gang-raped by seven males over five hours. This is an appalling example, but such candid discussion of the reality for athletes like Kost has led to the adoption of anti-discrimination and code of conduct policies by most sports and governing bodies. While this is not necessarily the strong reaction that should result from such disclosures, it is a move that will only help to further the prevention of destructive behaviour and attitudes within sporting culture. Acknowledgment of the power balance in athlete-coach, athlete-administrator, or athlete-athlete relationships comes in the wake of many other abuse-of-power scandals with a wide variety of sports. As money and fame becomes an even greater driving force for young athletes who want to succeed, it is essential these dreams of success are not exploited by those who have the power to affect the outcome of athletic careers.

More of this open and honest discourse on the nature and purpose of sports for both athletes and the spectating public, male and female, needs to be entered for further change toward the more egalitarian, less discriminatory sporting culture for which many administrative bodies seem to be striving. Education programs, and public understanding in general, have had a great effect on making sports more accessible to female and other marginalized athletes. More and more people coaching and administering elite sports are now female, which in itself brings about subtle changes in policy and practice. In my own time as an athlete, I have seen a lot of positive changes in both participants in sport and the people watching them, and look forward to seeing many more in the years to come.

Kyla Bremner has a BSc in biochemistry and a BA in English with from the University of Sydney and the Australian National University. She began wrestling in Canada at Simon Fraser University. She currently represents Australia internationally in freestyle wrestling, and is also an active rock climber and mountaineer.

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