

# Muscular, Bruised, and

BY NICOLE NEVERSON AND PHILIP WHITE

*Cet article examine comment est négociée l'identité sexuelle des femmes à l'intérieur des équipes intercollégiales de ballon-panier. Il s'agit ici d'une observation ethnographique relevée quand une poupée Barbie modifiée a été présentée à une équipe de ballon-panier, comme une joueuse blessée. À la lumière de cet incident qui a déstabilisé la Barbie, symbole de féminité, on a trouvé que bien que les joueuses soient conscientes de leur force et de leur corps en bonne forme, elles sont constamment obligées de négocier avec leur féminité.*

It is no coincidence that a woman shaped like Barbie would not be a very successful participant in most current sporting events. (Lenskyj 171)

This paper investigates the negotiation and construction of gender identities in a women's intercollegiate basketball program.<sup>1</sup> The data upon which the findings are reported were drawn from participant observation and interviews conducted between September 2000 and April 2001. The particular focus of this paper is upon a period during observation when one of the players introduced to the team a *Barbie* doll which had been modified to emulate another team member who was often visibly injured. Their playful use of the *Barbie* doll, ironic and otherwise, is explored to excavate the meanings they make of their own feminine identities in the world of basketball and beyond.

As a powerful signifier of ultra-femininities, the presence of the *Barbie* doll provided a basis for observing how aspects of the players' feminine

---

In aesthetic sports like gymnastics or figure skating the employment of the body to signify emphasized femininity is a cultural imperative, the effect of which is to foreground gender difference.

---

identities simultaneously coincided with and contradicted those of the doll. The findings below touch on femininities, the female body, consent, resistance, and the employment of the female athletic body as cultural capital. Athletic participation itself and the rituals/routines of intercollegiate basketball are explored as sites of resistance and the "doing of gender."

## **Basketball and the female body: Theoretical considerations**

Perhaps more than ever before women and girls are less likely to feel compelled to offer the feminine apologetic with regards to their athleticism. To anticipate our findings below, there is reason to believe that, for some women at least, sport is a comfortable context within which they feel empowered by their physicality. Until relatively recently, girls and women were either routinely excluded from participation in sport

or their performances were entirely trivialized and marginalized. While these processes remain common there has also been progress in opening up opportunities for women's involvement in sport and in winning greater media coverage of female athleticism; witness the start-up in 2001 of *WTSN*, a digital television station devoted solely to women's sport. Of late, there has been rapid growth in participation in women's sport, including sports such as hockey, wrestling, and rugby, all of which were previously exclusive male preserves. By successfully breaching these male domains, women are experiencing their bodies in more powerful, forceful ways (Theberge).

The body is central to performance in sport. Among female athletes the actions of the body have been shown to offer an empowering physicality (Theberge; McDermott). Sport is also a domain, however, where the body is disciplined and controlled in ways that reproduce the gender dichotomy (Foucault; Bordo; Hall). In aesthetic sports like gymnastics or figure skating, for example, the employment of the body to signify emphasized femininity is a cultural imperative, the effect of which is to foreground gender difference. As Bordo has suggested, there is a "subtle and often unwitting role played by our bodies in the symbolization and reproduction of gender" (16). Bodies, thus, are entities upon which gender is inscribed and through which gender is constructed. West and Zimmerman argue:

The doing of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of so-

# Sweaty Bodies ...

## This is *not* Barbie Territory

ciety is hostage to its production. Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine. (14)

The conceptualization of disciplined, culturally influenced, bodily acts and performances as masculine or feminine, however, fails to recognize how multiple gender identities are crystallized in individual actors. Some performative acts of gender may conform to dominant codes of masculinity or femininity. Others may not, electing instead to resist the confines of the existing gender order. In the analysis below, the “doing” of gender among female intercollegiate basketball players is presented in three ways. First, in the process of introducing a *Barbie* doll and modifying her for their own purposes the athletes played with the idea of femininity. Second, we found that the players “did” gender in varying ways depending on context. Third, the ways in which the players “did” gender both challenged and resisted dominant constructions of femininity.

In North America at least, *Barbie* is an iconic representation of what is sometimes called “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1995). Her beauty is flawless, manufactured, westernized. *Barbie*’s ubiquitous cultural significance is powerfully linked with the childhood socialization experiences of young girls. Through playing with *Barbie*, many young girls learn stylized body practices that emphasize the cultural requirements of surveillance and discipline in the

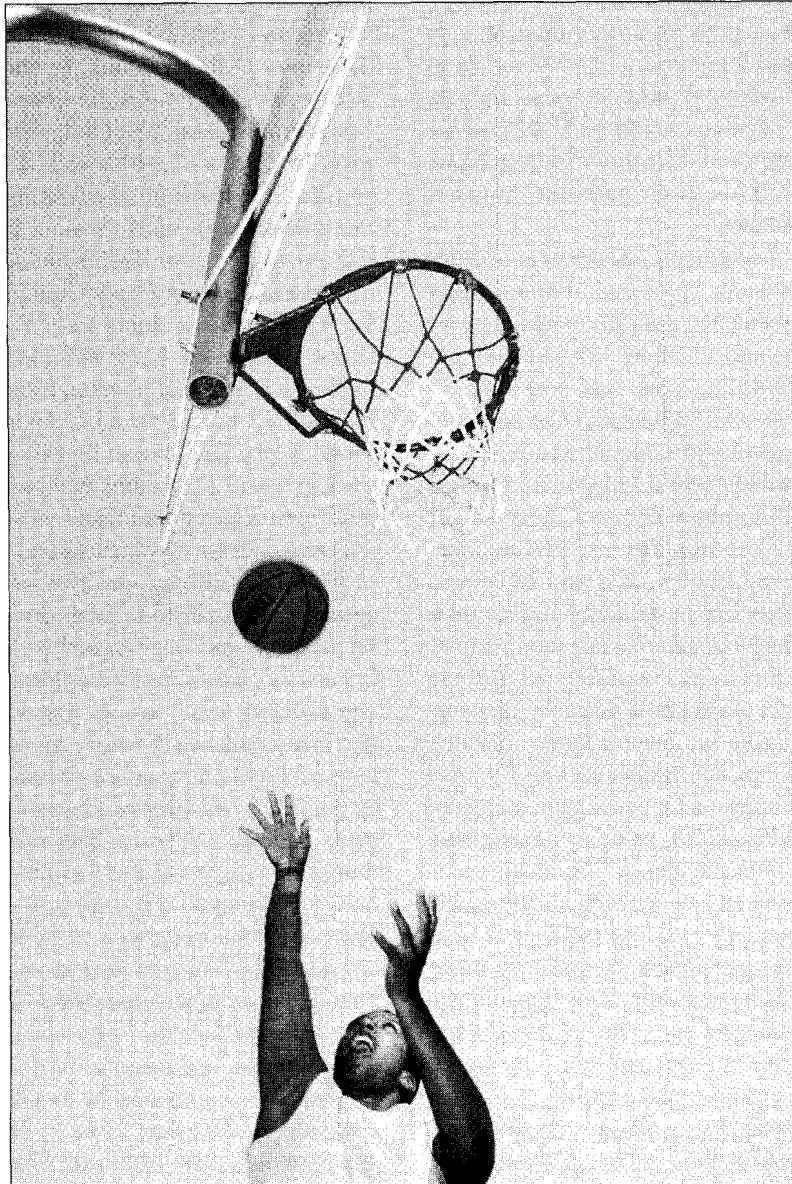


Photo: Marlene Hielema

service of cosmeticized physical appearance. Most boys learn that even the most casual acknowledgment of the existence of the doll would leave them open to social ridicule and their masculinity being called into question. “Doing gender” with *Barbie*, through playing with her, is constructed as an exclusively feminine activity.

Physically, *Barbie* has small feet, a tiny waist, small hands, long fingers and legs, modestly flared hips, an ample bosom, big blue eyes and long flowing blonde hair. Her breasts have no nipples, and she has no vagina (Cunningham). Once adorned with clothing and accessories, *Barbie* epitomizes idealized femininity and the disciplined attention to detail it ne-

cessitates. She can be dressed up, driven around in a fancy red sports car, have her hair styled, and even set up on a date with Ken—her most essential accessory. On another level, of course, it is also evident that *Barbie*, the icon of feminine perfection, is a prime example of what the average woman is not. According to Urla and Swedlund, if the *Glitter Beach Barbie* doll were an actual human, her height would be 5'10" and her waist size 20 inches.<sup>2</sup> She would also weigh a little over one hundred pounds.

Incidentally, she would not be able to blink, speak, or think or display visible muscles. She would also not be able to mimic sport activity because her arms, legs, and waist do not bend sufficiently. The latter design elements would not be so pernicious were it not that comparable male dolls, such as *G.I. Joe* and other male action figures, tend to have more flexible arms and leg joints. They are more *action* figures than *Barbie* despite the fact that many of her identities are associated with the idea of physical activity. For instance, *Barbie* has been a fashion model, ballerina, Olympic athlete, TV news reporter, doctor, rock star, presidential candidate, an astronaut, and even a *WNBA* player. Yet despite the physicality of some of her identities, her body type and her apparel have focused on how she looks, locating *Barbie* primarily as an object of the admiring gaze. *Barbie* leaves little room for alternatives to a preferred ultra-feminine reading. In other words, her accessories, clothing, and easy to comb and style blonde hair underscore the body disciplines required for the achievement of stereotypical femininity but not one that can be continuously negotiated or reinterpreted.<sup>3</sup>

### **Intercollegiate basketball players and their bodies: some findings**

Certainly the image of a muscular—even toned—woman runs counter to traditional prescrip-

tions for female passivity and weakness. (Messner 203)

Historically, sport has been a site where the muscular, strong and masculine body has been privileged. In this regard, sport is an arena where dominant masculinities are constructed and verified (Connell 1983; Theberge; Hall; Creedon). In the face of this imagery, girls have been confronted with a double bind. First they are held accountable as individuals (or as females) for not being more involved in sport. Second, if they do excel in sport their femininity may be called to question. Clearly, for female athletes, doing sport involves the physical body; the same body that is held up for comparison to idealized bodies found ubiquitously in popular culture. Invoking the concept of physicality, McDermott has suggested that female athletes actively resist dominant notions of femininity through the physical agency often required to be successful in sport; and this physicality is linked to social power. The building and maintenance of strong, athletic bodies has challenged formerly dominant notions of how female athletes do gender. In the process, many female athletes not only challenge dominant notions of the feminine body but also those of the masculine one as well—but not always without tension (Cole). The complexities and contradictions of the experiences of intercollegiate basketball players who were observed and interviewed for this study are reported below. In the first section, the issue of the body and femininities are addressed. The second section will integrate how the players reacted when one player gave another player a gift of a *Barbie* Doll she had modified for a joke.

When it came to how the players thought about their athletic bodies there was considerable variation within the team. For instance, Emma talked about her ambivalence about her body:

*I think I have a very stereotypical*

*view of feminine... graceful, slender, reserved—those kinds of things [...] I'm strong right now, have a strong fit body, but don't want to look any more masculine* (Field notes: March 3, 2001).

Thus, for some of the players, but not others (see below), the female athletic body was seen as different in relation to prevalent ideals of femininity (Messner; Daniels). Emma's reservations about the potential masculinizing effect of an even bigger body were not matched by some of her teammates or by the experiences of athletes reported on in other comparable studies (Daniels; Allison and Butler; Goldberg and Chandler; Young and White). In recent years, many contemporary female athletes have been socialized in contexts where female involvement and athletic female bodies are seen as normative rather than exceptional. What female athletes articulate about their sporting bodies is now quite likely to denote primary identities as athletes rather than girls/women doing sport. In other words, for some intercollegiate basketball players at least, they do not see themselves as "doing" gender when they practice or play basketball. In comparison to Emma, Autumn described gender in terms of physical agency:

*This is feminine—like playing basketball is part of it. Being strong and active. Like the gender roles are not [static] for me... (Putting on make-up, lipstick, doing your nails, etc.) Yeah, those things are feminine but this [basketball] is too.* (Field notes: March 3, 2001)

### **Enter Barbie: and she's got problems**

The complexities (and flexibilities) of gender for the players were articulated by responses within the team after Kim presented Emily with a "modified" *Barbie* doll at a Christmas party. The doll, which Kim had owned since childhood, had been

altered to represent a simulation of Emily—a player generally regarded as the type of player who often seems to end up on the receiving end of more aggressive play by opposing players. Emily had sprained her shoulder, sported black eyes and other visible bruises, and suffered a concussion in the month or so leading up to the party. From a regular *Barbie* doll, Kim had fashioned *Concussion Head Emily*:

*The doll had once been a Barbie. It had been transformed into a pseudo-replica of Emily. The doll wore a small burgundy basketball uniform and Emily's uniform number. Her face was afflicted with a black eye—for which Emily had received much friendly teasing from her teammates in recent weeks. (Field notes: December 17, 2000)*

As part of the joke, Kim had packaged *Concussion Head Emily* in a pink box. Other teammates had contributed to the packaging process by writing on the outside of the box. The following fieldnotes describe what happened when Emily was presented with the gift:

*Emily began to read out the product descriptions on the outside of Concussion Head Emily's box. The outer box bore testimonials from other players on how much fun they had with the doll while modifying her for the party. For example according to the side of the box, one could collect other team players in the collection: "Massive Calves Lindsay ..." among others.*

What came out of this moment, which Emily correctly guessed had been mostly Kim's doing, was amusement about the comedic accuracy of the comments pasted on the outside of the box. Emily had endured more than a few head concussions. Yet, the comedy was rendered benign because it

**Table 1**  
**Glitter Beach Barbie**

Height: 5'10"  
Waist: 20"

**Players:**

Player	Height	Waist	Shoe Size	
			Men's	Women's
Emma	5'8"	29-30"	7	8.5
Stacey	5'11"	31"	9.5	11
Misty	6'0"	31-32"	10.5	12
Nancy	5'9"	29-32"	7	12
Autumn	5'11"	31-32"	9.5	11
Emily	5'7"	32"	8	9.5
Lindsay	5'9"	28"	7	8.5
Crystal	5'6"	28"	7.5	9
Kim	5'8"	31"	7.5	9.5
Jamie	5'7"	31"	6.5	8
Mel	5'4"	26"	5	5
Rachel	5'3"	28"	6	7
Dawn	5'11"	31"	10.5	12
<b>Averages</b>	<b>5'6"</b>	<b>30.1"</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>9.5</b>

*was a commonplace on the team that Emily's toughness was important to the success of the team. Yes, the players frequently teasingly commented on Lindsay's muscular body. But, they [ ... ] admired toughness, athleticism and [playing with] heart. Emily, as with other players, had a reputation for playing through injuries. Sprained ankles, concussions, and fractured noses were not unusual for these players.*

*The humour was also predicated on the playful employment of a Barbie doll upon which a resistant femininity had been superimposed. [Barbie] is supposed to epitomize the true female—slender, beautiful. Yet, here, in Kim's practical joke, a sort of rejection of those stereotypical beliefs had been created. Barbie had been modified to signify strength, agility, sweat, toughness (or at least what players identify as toughness) ... Barbie was playing*

*through injury—she symbolized an empowered femininity. (Field notes: December 17, 2000)*

On close inspection, *Concussion Head Emily* was really an anti-*Barbie* doll. Within her pink box, *Barbie* had a black eye. She also wore a facemask (fashioned out of electrical tape and blue construction paper) of a type sometimes used to protect an injured nose against further trauma. She had visible bruises on her biceps, forearms and knees. *Barbie's* body had been transformed from being flawless, perfect, and unblemished into being battered and heavily bruised.

The visible damage visited on *Concussion Head Emily* was also set off against the disparity between *Barbie's* and Emily's bodies. Emily, a 5'8" guard, team top scorer, and rookie of the year in her recruitment class, weighs 160lbs, has a 31" waist, and wears size 8.5 men's shoes (10-10.5 women's). These dimensions con-

trasted markedly with *Barbie's* unrealistically slim, feminine, delicate body. *Concussion Head Emily's* hair was knotted. Bruises on her face and body bore evidence of giving and receiving forceful physicality. Emily's toughness, aggression, and durability were gently but supportively parodied by her teammate's alteration of *Barbie's* appearance. *Concussion Head Emily* was also clearly physically active. She has agency. She is involved. She is an athlete.<sup>4</sup>

If we recall Urla and Swedlund's estimation of *Barbie's* physical dimensions were she an actual woman, we can compare them against the reality of the bodies of intercollegiate basketball players:

In Table 1, we can see that basketball players have bodies different to Barbie's. On average, they are 5'6", with a 30.1" waist, and weigh 151 pounds. They are also relatively muscular and well toned. A few have tattoos, which augment the day-to-day bruises, cuts, and blisters.

Just as *Barbie* performs ultra-femininity through her form-fitting outfits and her various accessories ranging from plastic furniture, hot tubs, hairbrushes, appliances and racecars, the players perform alternative femininities when they practice and play basketball. *Concussion Head Emily's* facemask rejects the *Barbie* ideal. It is positioned by the players as an accessory worn by basketball players willing to compete with a broken nose. Their identities are lived quite centrally through their bodies and their physicality. Rather than the usual accessories of feminine appearance, in the context of the game the players adorn their bodies with other symbols. These include: 1) ankle braces; 2) *Second Skin*: a moist gel that when applied to the skin cools, soothes and protects against rubbing and blisters (Used a lot by Emma and Crystal since the men's shoes they use are too wide for their feet); 3) tensor bandages to hold ice packs in place; and, 4) Zinc Oxide tape to wrap ankles and wrists. Given the daily grind of an intercollegiate

basketball season, these items play an important role in maintaining the health of the players. They also, of course, impart meaning about the people who use them. They are the foil of traditional feminine accessories such as lipstick, eye shadow and mascara which are employed to enhance physical appearance.<sup>5</sup> Such cosmetics connote the skilful mastery of the body disciplines required for the fabrication of emphasized and heterosexual femininity. By comparison tape and bandages are not conventionally thought to be heterosexually attractive. They may even draw attention to the athlete's imperfections rather than conceal them. *Barbie's* accessories enable her to be made *more* perfect than she naturally is. *Barbie's* accessories create illusion, transforming her appearance to attract the male (or what is imagined to be the male) gaze.

#### **Conclusion: no apologies necessary**

The findings suggest that some female athletes live in an era when it is not considered transgressive to be strong, tough, muscular, or even physically aggressive. Their dynamic, assertive, powerful bodies are not experienced (or perceived by others) as destabilizing or disruptive of femininity. In relation to shifting gender norms they are clear evidence of how the female athletic body and its meanings are in constant flux and negotiation. While this is a hint of progress, we are also reminded that women are more able to depart from tradition in sport than in other areas of life. As the enduring popularity of *Barbie* reveals, in many contexts women face scrutiny and criticism if they fail to adhere to the cultural imperatives of emphasized femininity (Laberge). Many current media images of the female athlete are testament to this double bind. Images of female athletes are often positioned outside of their active, sporting element or are marketed through the employment of sex appeal (Hargreaves; Duncan

and Hasbrook; Brooks).

The players who participated in this study, however, also showed that they wilfully play with gender and the idea of femininity. While within the limits of this paper it was not possible to fully elucidate how the players experienced and expressed different types of femininity at different times and in different contexts, preliminary findings from the current fieldwork offered encouraging signs of progress. Many in this group of athletes comfortably challenged dominant notions of gender. They transformationally explored and embraced variable representations of femininity in the flux of their daily lives. Within this mix most were unapologetic about their athleticism or their powerful bodies (see also, Feste; Broad).

Muscles, bruises, and sweat are not typically associated with *Barbie*. Perhaps they never will be. Things *are* changing for the better, though, witness the availability of *Gabi, The Get Real Girl*, a doll who can play soccer, comes with shin guards, and is able to twist and bend into realistic representations of sporting poses. Her thighs are large and muscular like the rest of her body and she has "soccer" calves and abs. Her female sporting body is transformational, as was *Concussion Head Emily's*. *Gabi* offers an alternative to the version of femininity to the still-popular *Barbie*. She represents the possibility of different interpretations of and attitudes towards the female body. She may even herald that day when female athletes in general do not "do gender" at all. They will simply "do" sport.

*Nicole Neverson is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.*

*Philip White is Professor of Kinesiology at McMaster University. He is a co-editor (with Kevin Young) of Sport and Gender in Canada (Oxford University Press).*

<sup>1</sup>The names of the participants in

this study have been altered to maintain anonymity.

<sup>2</sup>Urla and Swedlund conducted an "anthropometry" of Barbie. They extrapolated from the size of the doll to an estimate of her dimensions were she a human.

<sup>3</sup>In the end, Barbie's accessories confine the doing of gender to limited possibilities. In her ethnographic study of ethnically correct dolls and young working-class females, Elizabeth Chin observed that her participants wondered if the manufacturer would ever make a "fat," "pregnant" or "abused" Barbie. They thought that Barbie is a stereotype. To make Barbie more relevant to their lives they modified and fashioned her so as to look the part of a doll they would like to play with.

<sup>4</sup>Though there exists a *WNBA Barbie* made in celebration of women participating at the professional level, she comes with a basketball but cannot appropriately shoot it. Not only can this be an intended commentary on the abilities of the women she emulates but one on the inability of her manufacturers to provide her with practical elbow and knee joints being that she serves to exemplify a female athlete. Essentially, *WNBA Barbie* is a *Barbie doll* accessorized with an appropriate *WNBA* team uniform and basketball. Her body is not an athletic body. It is Barbie's body marketed in *WNBA* symbols.

<sup>5</sup>The issue of make-up and other feminizing products is actually more complex than indicated here. Within the team there was a wide variation among the players in their uses of feminizing symbols, both on court and in other areas of life.

## References

- Allison, Maria and Beverly Butler. "Role Conflict and the Elite Female Athlete: Empirical Findings and Conceptual Dilemmas." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 19 (1984): 157-167.
- Bordo, Susan. "Reading the Slender Body." *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*. Eds. M. Jacobus, E. Foxkeller and S. Shuttleworth. New York: Routledge, 1990. 83-111.
- Broad, K. L. "The Gendered Unapologetic: Queer Resistance in Women's Sport." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 18 (2001): 181-204.
- Brooks, Christine. "Using Sex Appeal as a Sport Promotion Strategy." *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 10 (2001): 1-16.
- Cole, Cheryl L. "Resisting The Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and Technologies of the Body." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 17 (1993): 77-97.
- Connell, R. W. *Which Way is Up?* Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1983.
- Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Chin, Elizabeth. "Ethnically Correct Dolls: Toying With the Race Industry." *American Anthropologist* 101 (1999): 305-321.
- Creedon, Pamela J. Ed. *Women, Media and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.
- Cunningham, Kamy. "Barbie Doll Culture and The American Waistland." *Symbolic Interaction* 16 (1993): 79-83.
- Daniels, Dayna B. "Gender (Body) Verification (Building)." *Play and Culture*. 5 (1992): 370-377.
- Duncan, M. C., and Cynthia Hasbrook. "Denial of Power in Televised Women's Sports." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 15 (1988): 1-21.
- Festle, Mary Jo. *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies In Women's Sports*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.
- Goldberg, Alan D. and Timothy Chandler. "Sport Participation Among Adolescent Girls: Role Conflict or Multiple Roles?" *Sex Roles* 25 (1991): 213-224.
- Hall, M. A. *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1993.
- Hargreaves, Jennifer. *Sporting Females*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Laberge, Suzanne. "Toward An Integration of Gender Into Bourdieu's Concept of Cultural Capital." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1995): 132-146.
- Lenskyj, Helen. "Women, Sport, and Sexualities." *Sport and Gender in Canada*. Eds. P. White and K. Young. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1994. 170-181.
- McDermott, Lisa. "Toward a Feminist Understanding of Physicality Within the Context of Women's Physically Active And Sporting Lives." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 13 (1996): 12-30.
- Messner, Michael A. "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988): 197-211.
- Theberge, Nancy. "The Construction of Gender in Sport: Women Coaching and the Naturalization of Difference." *Social Problems* 43 (1993): 301-312.
- Urla, Jacqueline and Alan Swedlund. "The Anthropometry Of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture." *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*. Eds. Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. 227-313.
- West, C. and D. Zimmerman. "Doing Gender." *The Social Construction of Gender*. Eds. J. Lorber and S. Farrell. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1999. 13-37.
- Young, Kevin and Philip White. "Sport, Physical Danger, and Injury: The Experiences of Elite Women Athletes." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 19 (1995): 45-61.