

Are Sisters Doing It For Themselves?

An Analysis of Gender and the Sport Initiation Ceremony

BY JAY JOHNSON

Cet article met l'accent sur la prolifération des femmes engagées dans les sports et les activités qui accompagnent plusieurs cérémonies d'initiation. L'auteure critique les différents aspects de ces cérémonies qui humilient les participantes et qui sont des occasions de renforcer les atérotypes sexuels et les abus liées à certaines pratiques.

When men begin to feel the challenge from women to their dominant position within the "institution of organized sport," they feel the need to increase the masculinizing power of sport in order to recharge and re-establish their dominant position (Messner 1992). This reclaiming of sport as a male preserve also re-establishes the beliefs and values inherent within the masculine ideal in order to support patriarchal relations and the male-female gender dichotomy which seems central to hegemonic power (Dunning). These perceptions mirror some of the observations of initiation characteristics (Alfred University; Bryshun; Holman; Johnson) which serve as a site to perpetuate and replicate masculine identities and reinforce patriarchal relations. It would seem to follow that the initiation ceremony, cloaked in secrecy and homosociality would be an active forum where males may actively express their masculinity without the disruption seemingly caused by the feminine presence.

Obedying the rules and structure handed down seem crucial in the successful construction of this identity. This effectively establishes a power hierarchy where those at the top maintain the most power and the

initiate is the less powerful, subordinate member within the hierarchy (Holman; Sabo and Panepinto). Other components of which the hegemonic masculine identity is composed include the devaluation of women, the sanctioned use of aggression, the use of social isolation, the tolerance of pain, and the marginalization of homosexuals (Dunning; Kidd; Messner; Pronger; Sabo and Panepinto; Young, White and McTeer).

By consciously devaluing women, men and boys can bond "symbolically" as a separate and superior group to women as a result of its importance as an integral component of hegemonic masculinity (Messner). Men view themselves as superior in an athletic sense in an attempt to establish superiority within the institution of organized sports. Therefore it has become more socially acceptable for a woman to be masculine than for a man to be feminine because it is more tolerable to take power than it is to relinquish it (Pronger 58).

Aggressive and violent sports such as football and rugby are often used by the dominant group in sport as a means of further supporting male-female differences. Men support and maintain the ideology that they are bigger and stronger, more suited to these types of combative sports than women are (Dunning 80). This is an attempt by men to reinforce their position of power over women by effectively reducing or marginalizing female participation in a male defined institution.

Research on sport hazing

With the proliferation of females

being able to actively participate in sport coupled with an increasing awareness of the activities which accompany many initiation ceremonies it is possible to examine the differing aspects of the initiation ceremony that focus on not only the gender of the participants, but on the abuses and stereotypes that are reinforced as a result of certain practices. The genderization of initiation ceremonies is a common theme exhibited on both male and female teams (Bryshun; Holman; Johnson). The use of demeaning, provocative clothing, as well as cross-dressing by male initiates, is intended to demean and humiliate the novice. This stereotypical misogynist practice would not serve its intended purpose if being a woman in our society meant being extended the same respect, dignity and equality as it is for men (Robinson). Many initiations involve homoerotic activities or demeaning exercises at the expense of gay men. Again, if homosexuality were an ac-

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ceptable lifestyle culture, the initiation would not have the intended degrading effect. The heterosexualization of both male and female initiations serves to further excise "the demons of homosexuality," and to convey to the membership acceptable practice and comportment within the culture of the team.

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Methodology

The research for this project was conducted via qualitative (Corbin and Strauss), open-ended, in-depth interview studies with twelve university athletes. They were members of various athletic teams including, ice hockey, football, soccer, basketball, volleyball, field hockey, swimming, waterpolo, and rugby; these have been previously documented as sports in which initiations occur (Bryshun). There is little empirical data on sport initiations so the study aspired to broaden our scope and understanding of the topic through the experiences of those who have participated in these types of rituals.

The participants selected for this study were six male and six female, Ontario University Athletic Association (OUAA) varsity team players ranging in age between 19 and 24 years. Ten of the participants were undergraduates and two were at the graduate level. All of the par-

ticipants were at least in their second year with their respective teams. This ensured that they had assumed the roles of both initiator and initiate. To maintain confidentiality specific university affiliation will not be disclosed; however, the two universities to which the students belonged have in place official policies designed to regulate initiation practices.

It must be noted that because of the possibility that athletes or coaches would be communicating accounts of potentially illegal behaviour (e.g., vandalism, theft, sexual assault and/or abuse) confidentiality was paramount. I ensured that all participants would remain anonymous. Moreover, I decided against organizing focus groups and chose instead to conduct personal in-depth interviews in an attempt to create an open environment where participants would feel comfortable enough to relay their accounts of hazing experiences. I feel that this was achieved, as all participants appeared to be quite willing and eager to explore the topic and to contribute valuable insights and personal observations.

What did become apparent during this process is how closed the culture really is. There is a sense of connectedness that ties the athletes to one another. Stories of initiations are discussed among the athletes themselves and at times they are invited to be either passive or active participants in initiations on other teams. This co-operative nature of the athletic community became a built-in method of verifying and cross-checking the validity of the data.

Clothing and cross-dressing

A common practice for both male and female initiations is the sexualization of the rite of passage. This is achieved through a variety of methods. The use of clothing and assumed identities is utilized by both men's and women's teams, although their approaches are different. Initiations, will sometimes demand that

their neophyte ensemble dress as women, wear women's undergarments, frequent known gay bars and interact with patrons, or be paraded around in public.

We had to get a woman's dress and wear it to all of the different bars. We then went to a known gay bar where we had to get a telephone number and we had to give them ours. (Peter)

For some of the teams, knowledge of the cross-dressing is kept within the circle of the team, like a closely guarded secret that requires the initiate to assume the role in a public forum.

We had to get women's underwear that could not be our Mother's or our sister's and we had to wear that all day underneath our other clothing. The veterans had to see us, and if they wanted to see our underwear they would ask and we had to show them that we had it on. (Jonathan)

Women's teams will often require their rookie groups to dress up, usually in sexually explicit, revealing and degrading outfits, characterized by exaggerated makeup and outrageous costumes. In all of the examples presented however, none cross-dressed as men. In fact, one female rugby team designed their initiation attire to ridicule their varsity cheerleading team.

We like to make fun of the cheerleaders, they all had to dress like babies. One of our props threatened to punch any cheerleaders that came to our game. They had pigtails. We had the rookies make fun of them with fake cheers and things like that. Women's rugby is seen as so butchy or anti-feminine and cheerleading is the epitome of that so we are real athletes and they are real girlie-girls. We don't really consider them to be athletes. All cheerleaders do is nod their

heads and smile prettily. Not that they are bad people but we are involved with intense physical contact they are jumping up and down and catching one another. We had shirts made up that said we can handle our batons, Dumb-ass Majorettes, all the rookies had to wear these shirts as well as ugly skirts, freckles, we made them real girlie-girl. (Tanja)

The purpose of both activities is to humiliate and degrade the rookies, assuming roles that their team membership views as less than desirable and unacceptable beyond the initiation ceremony. The ostracized targets of the initiation behaviour are primarily marginalized groups in society, homosexuals, prostitutes, and women. The teams demand that their initiates present themselves as these individuals for the duration of the initiation ceremony to degrade their contingent, reinforcing the stereotypes and further victimizing these segments of the population. Men use gays and women as their desired targets for humiliation and so do women. Even within the rugby example, Tanja makes it quite clear that they are ridiculing more traditional female athletes because they are not considered to be equal in the eyes of her team.

Heterosexualization of initiations

A crucial element of many of the initiation ceremonies is the reinforcing of heterosexual ideals, pervasive in many of the ritualized activities. There are expectations and underlying assumptions within varsity team circles, and the larger society, that everyone is heterosexual. This postulate is embedded within many initiation traditions. Whether it be that women bring condoms, simulate fellatio, or that men watch female strippers and describe sexual exploits, it is expected that the neophytes always ascribe to heterosexual stereotypes and practices.

You had to bring a picture of a centerfold, your girlfriend or your Mom, you had to tell a sexual story and a funny joke. They then rate you on what you brought, so you pass around the centerfold and the picture of your girlfriend. The vets are sitting at a long table in front of me and all of the rookies that had gone before me are now behind. I don't remember what my sex story was, I probably lied, I was only 18 and didn't have a lot of experience, I told them that I was caught having sex with my girlfriend by my Mother. (Mark)

The design of this aspect of the initiation is such that it demands that you conform in the presence of all of the team, to the heterosexual ideals which they see as a part of the neophytes' conditional acceptance within the ranks of the players.

For women's teams, the expectations of heterosexual behaviours is inherent in activities such as the physical graffiti that is written on the rookies, "cocksucker" or other such sexual terms of abuse, or where the initiates are expected to place a banana between each other's legs, place a condom on it and demonstrate to the group how they would perform oral sex. Some rookies may have neither the experience nor the desire to publicly exhibit this comportment, yet the team seeks this hetero-allegiance.

Rugby teams will also utilize sexually explicit songs in public forums to reinforce such ideals.

The songs that we sing are heterosexual and sexual as well. Some are just about drinking. The songs that are sung are still sung by people that maybe don't drink and are maybe homosexual. The larger society just assumes that everyone is heterosexual. Writing cocksucker on somebody who is a lesbian might be an attempt to reinforce the heterosexual ideal. Even women who are. (Karen)

Thus the desire to align oneself with the sport subculture is stronger than that of sexuality.

Objectification

Some of the female initiations required the initiands to interact in a public space, usually a bar, or residence, with members of the opposite sex. These orchestrated activities served to debase and objectify their initiands. Some of the female participants spoke of discomfort at having to seek out men's signatures on their bodies while scantily dressed in a crowded bar.

They made us all wear these outfits and white shirts and they gave us a marker where we had to get guys in the bar to sign it everywhere. Some of the signatures were in places that at any other time, I would have been embarrassed about. (Yvonne)

The intent of this practice is to enforce dominance over the rookies. They are placed in a vulnerable, demeaning position, which eliminates their freedom and control over their own bodies.

These types of activities were described by virtually all of the subjects, and all serve to reinforce heterosexual ideals and disciplines within

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the team community. Some of the initiations by nature, reinforce misogynist and homophobic beliefs, objectifying and demeaning to both women and homosexuals in an attempt to convey to their membership the appropriate range of cultural norms and parameters of acceptable practices and those that are looked upon as unacceptable.

Degree of brutality

During the course of the interviews, many comments were made concerning the perceived differences between males initiating and females initiating. By far, the most cited divergence between the two was the level of brutality and cruelty that males would force upon the initiands. One participant explains her experiences of being initiated onto a female team as well as a co-ed one.

Guys tend to be crueller. In swimming it was the guys doing it whereas with waterpolo it was the girls doing the initiation. The guys are the enforcers. They are more controlling. That is the way it has always been. There was a real power issue, the guys definitely took more control in terms of making sure that the initiation tasks got done. Being a girl on the team and saying no isn't as big a deal as being a guy and saying no. It is really a bigger deal. There is pressure and taunting displayed by the male veterans on other males if they refuse to do something. They will be labeled wimp or pussy or girl. (Mary)

This comment illustrates how females are perceived to be less of a threat to the male patriarchal hierarchy, evident in the desire of the male initiators to place elevated demands upon their male rookies to conform and submit to the will of the team. The rationale behind this fundamental difference, in both the approach

and the execution of the initiation ceremony, is explained in two different ways. Women's involvement in traditionally male dominated arenas of sport is expanding and developing at an increasing rate (Johnson 2000). Women's means, motives and methods are constantly being challenged and questioned by their male counterparts and as a result they are forced to struggle, compete, and overcome systemic barriers that are placed in their path towards equity in sport. There is recognition among the female participants that their involvement in sport is a constant engagement against systems, individuals and administrations who are attempting to detract from their rightful place in the arena of sport.

The second reason is the mutual respect and nurturing elements of relations between women:

Women in sport is still a new concept to me. Women already go through enough to get to sports. They have many more commitments and responsibilities than guys do. People are still so surprised that women are playing these sports. We have worked so hard to get to where we are, we don't need another hardship to go through. Maybe that is why we respect each other so much more. Every team I have been involved with has always been supportive. I believe that the inherent nature of women is that we really are more sensitive and empathetic. Women's teams are more lenient when it comes to initiations. We respect each other a little more than the guys do. (Karen)

Both of these quotes illustrate the gendered order inherent within the male set of beliefs. On the co-ed team, women are not perceived as much a threat as the incoming male group to the patriarchal structure. However, Karen speaks to the issue of systemic and masculine barriers to female entry and acceptance in sport.

A hypermasculine reaction which attempts to undermine women's legitimacy in the arena of sport.

Nudity and sexual content

During the course of this study it was observed to be the exclusive prerogative of male initiations to include nudity as a part of their ritual. To a degree, some women's teams engaged in this type of behaviour, occasionally parading their rookies around the bar or the campus in revealing clothing, but never requiring their initiands to completely reveal their bodies in a public forum. The sexual content of the initiations was more defined and explicit among male participants. The differing variable between the two is the level of force that is used to ensure rookie capitulation and conformity.

Our team doesn't make anyone feel uncomfortable purposely, it is just a fun time and a reason to party together. The things that we ask our rookies to do are not outrageous things like fucking frozen chickens. It doesn't involve any sort of nudity. We stay away from things that we think are degrading. (Karen)

Presence of females at male initiations

Some of the initiations involve the presence of the opposite sex in the audience. At times they are asked to take an active role, engaging in some of the initiation activities.

The first year that I went they picked me to get a lap dance from the guy with the largest penis who turned out to be a guy from my English class. It was really embarrassing for both of us. Our role is that we are there to hoot and holler. It has always been kind of disgusting for me. (Karen)

Women were only present for male initiations when the ceremony in-

volved nudity. The role they were asked to fill were those of judges and observers.

They always get the rookies drunk and get them naked, rub A5-35 all over themselves and their balls. They then have to get up and dance in front of the women's team. In my first year, we had to line the rookies up according to penis size and then they had to jerk-off. None of them could get it up because they were so drunk. (Jenn)

One female participant also acknowledged that one of the purposes of having females present during the initiation ceremony is to degrade and humiliate the rookies.

It wouldn't happen if we weren't there to make fun of them. It is degrading, it reinforces sex roles, and hypermasculinity. There is nothing positive about it at all. Other than their "rite of passage" which should have nothing to do with us. If I said that to them, maybe the women's team wouldn't go to it anymore. (Tanja)

Presence of males at female initiations

There were more examples of the presence of males during female initiations. Primarily they were there in the role of passive observer, but in one instance an audience member was recruited to actively participate in the initiation.

This one guy was there; he was a male manager who would do anything for the team. We decided on blindfolding the rookies, taking (our male manager) and putting whipped cream all over him and burying smarties in the cream. He was wearing boxer shorts and a toque, we were all outside. The first girl came up and we asked if they had any food allergies, she said no, so we blindfolded her and

placed her near him. We instructed her to get as many smarties out of here as quickly as she can using no hands. They wanted to win; they didn't realize what they were doing. The first girl we took the blindfold off of and she realized that it was a guy, did a doubletake and just started laughing. (Tanja)

There were also other situations where males were present for female initiation evenings. Many of the female interviewees commented on how the presence of the male observance heightened their level of apprehension and raised their anxiety levels about performing the demands of the initiation rites: in this example to the point where some individuals chose to opt out of the act.

The men's waterpolo team was there for our initiation. It didn't really bother me that they were there. We had to bring a condom and put it on a banana that was being held between one of the other women's legs. The guys didn't do anything; they just sat there. Once the condom was on we then had to demonstrate what we would do, how we would give a blowjob. Other girls were really resistant to it, they didn't want to do it. Some were given the option to drink instead of doing it. (Mary)

Paulo was privy to the women's rugby initiation. He was also in the role of passive observer, commenting on his experience.

I went to the women's initiation, it was really sexual, I was surprised. It was quite sexual in design. I thought that they wouldn't touch that at all. There were toys and stuff, ours had nothing to do with women or porn, we laugh about it and sing songs, and they had condoms and dildos and male porn everywhere. The women were drunk and having a good time. It was surprising to see women go to that level, I had heard stories of

women's rugby initiations being pretty crude, dissing men and the like. They are crass and sexist, talking about prostitutes and S and M, there are some bad thoughts there. It was quite an experience. (Paulo)

Paulo's shock and surprise seems to be more of a reaction to the emulation of male stereotypical behaviour and the reinforced gender stereotypes exhibited during the initiation. They had created an environment in which males had effectively been emasculated, relegated to the sidelines, idle observers in the crowd as the rich pageant paraded past them. The invitation and presence of both male and female participants at each other's initiations reinforces the heterosexualization of the ceremony, validating the gender specific sexualized acts.

Reasons for the differences

Most female subjects noted how their rookies were genuinely interested in participating in their initiation activities, whereas their male counterparts thrived more on the completion of the activity so that they could then later be initiators. The sense of power and control is more relevant for the men in groups.

It would have been easier to opt out of the female waterpolo initiation rather than the swimming one, which is coed. Guys do things to prove they are men. Girls are more, I will do what I want to do and that is all right. They don't have to prove themselves by funneling booze until they puke. You can still be my friend and everything is all right where the guys are like, 'Hey, look at me, I'm cool because I just funneled six beers'. There are some real power issues there, there are other ways to make people do things. (Mary)

Some female participants however, did not view the initiation as a gate-

way into another culture, one that offers a change in status and recognition for the participant. It was more of a festive, celebratory atmosphere, rather than an ordeal of emotional or physical tasks.

It is not the same feeling like "getting to the other side" like the Men's team. It is not something you have to get through. (Yvonne)

Yvonne's response encapsulates the sense of removal from the sensationalism which surrounds the ceremony. There is a real de-emphasis among female teams on the feral, ritualistic nature of the initiation ceremony.

Women in sport

In comparing male varsity to female varsity sport, many of the interviewees discussed both the perception of and the respect for women in sport. There were many accounts of misogynist, biased and prejudicial practices and beliefs concerning women in sport at both an administrative and peer level.

Even during the school year, if a guy isn't performing up to his potential he will be told to join the girl's team or to hang out with them. Like it is bad to be a girl. The women's team finished first and the guys second, their egos were crushed. The guys want us to hate them, they are always mean to us on the pool deck, very degrading and demeaning. They were cruel but I think that they thought that they had to act that way. (Mary)

The men aspired to conform to ascribed roles within a gendered order with definite structure and order for the participants: one which sees men at the top, setting that order and maintaining the system through the control of others within that paradigm (Holman; Johnson; Messner; Sabo; Whitson). When this balance shifts, so does the behaviour between

the participants who are now perceived as being a threat to the power based continuum, be it women in sport or rookies aspiring to enter the domain of the team.

All we want is to be treated the same. Why do the men get better time slots than us when we have a better record? We are separate genders. Why do men have to be involved? We play the same rules but it is a different game. Develop what you are and then we become a better sport than the men. That is when men start kicking our legs out from under us. They say we are all lesbians, so that takes us down a notch, your sport is a crappy female version of the real sport, that is another notch down. They take their notches and pile them on themselves. They see that we are almost at par with them in aggressive sport so they become super aggressive and do steroids. All sorts of problems stem from that. They perceive this sort of threat coming from whatever angle. (Jenn)

This belief can be one explanation for the noticeable differences between how women perceive the initiation ceremony and how men perceive the initiation ceremony, and in turn, how that vision is then put into practice.

For most of the athletes, their contact with initiations extended back to their varsity experience and into their high school years. The university initiation ceremonies are organized by veteran players in terms of location, content and timing. The actual initiation experiences included, team games, nudity, sexualized games, scavenger hunts and illegal practices. Many of these practices are configured to introduce new members into the power based, hierarchical structure of the team and to the masculine model which the initiation ceremony reinforces. The perpetuity of this imbalance of power model is contingent upon the

use of alcohol, secrecy, confinement and the cycle of status from initiated to initiator. The life of the initiation ceremony is sustained by the membership in the belief that it serves as a necessary "Rite of Passage", functioning to foster a sense of cohesion among teammates, maintained by the cycle of initiation and transmitted folklore.

There exists a perceived link between cohesion and success which can be attained through the initiation ceremony. Athletes will at times override their sense of safety in a bid for membership on their team, to be accepted or to simply avoid causing any ripples within the structure of the team. The initiation operates as a site of gendering through the use of clothing and cross-dressing, heterosexualizing, homo-eroticizing of the ceremonies, many of which serve to objectify, humiliate and degrade the initiate. Finally, there are differences in the way that males and females initiate in terms of the degree of brutality utilized, nudity and sexual content and the role that women play in sport.

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SHAUNA PAULL

stepping down her porch stairs

soft sough of bough at the joining place, the fence
 failing into dusk and like a body, the silence gathers me in
 and not away. there is my old friend I am hurting, the even-
 breathing of her wakefulness
 in which is hidden rupture, a child's into sorrow, tears I want
 to flesh again
 the way a doe calms an orchard, leaf-edged, mulled in
 shadow; a woman
 stepping down her porch stairs to a river, any river, treble
 stone round
 stone of her girlhood roughened in undercurrent and not
 away. there is her granite
 vigil I share, the lambent bend of water she was watching for a
 sign, sign of her stopped
 voice. there was that girl in the women's prison, her up-hill
 accumulations, the whole
 body of her death hung in linens, not away this young girl,
 she,
 the silence; and that boy on the street in my city, his cardboard
 roof, his
 h.i.v., tagged thinning wrist, sculpture of his jaw, its laboured
 life—his eyes – singing another world;
 and there is the one who troubles me with ringing throes of
 laughter,
 with unanswerable longings, one who would salt this damage,
 this waste,
 and stands away, calling—*leaf, now. fruit. fall to earth, heart—*
 though its silence gathers me in and with it now
 this answer, sap-serried, not without aching, this
 hard to hold desire for an apple in every hand.

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