
Sport and Bodily Empowerment: Female Athletes' Experiences with Roller Derby, Mixed Martial Arts, and Rugby

John Paul, PhD

Professor, Sociology and Anthropology
Washburn University
Topeka Kansas, USA 66621 john.paul1@washburn.edu

Carolyn Steinlage, BA

Department of Kinesiology,
Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas, USA 66621

Sharla Blank, PhD

Associate Professor, Sociology and Anthropology
Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas, USA 66621
sharla.blank@washburn.edu

Abstract: *Using qualitative fieldwork and in-depth interviews the authors explore the commonalities of experience that female athletes use to denaturalize and disrupt heterosexist and misogynist discourses in relation to sport. Specifically we detail how female athletes on three distinct sporting teams in the USA (members of a community roller derby team, teammates on a mixed-martial-arts fighting club, and student-athletes on a university rugby squad) use physical activity to challenge heterosexist ideology and facilitate empowering body experiences for themselves. Throughout this work we employ a sporting feminist perspective to help illustrate the meanings female athletes associate with bodily empowerment, as well as the various techniques used by them to overcome bodily alienation and objectification.*

Key Words: *Sport, Bodily Empowerment, Female Athletes, Roller Derby, Mixed Martial Arts, Rugby*

1. Introduction

Using qualitative fieldwork and in-depth interviews we explore the commonalities of experience that female athletes use to denaturalize and disrupt heterosexist and misogynist discourses in relation to sport. Specifically we detail how female athletes on three distinct sporting teams in the USA

(members of a community roller derby team, teammates on a mixed-martial-arts fighting club, and student-athletes on a university rugby squad) use physical activity to challenge heterosexist ideology and facilitate empowering body experiences for themselves. Throughout this work we employ a sporting feminist perspective to help illustrate the meanings female athletes associate with bodily empowerment, as well as the various techniques used by them to overcome bodily alienation and objectification. This article begins with a discussion of the concepts that establish the parameters for this work and illustrate the conceptual nexus between women, physical activity, and social power. Following this, the method is described. Lastly, the main analytical thrust of the article is taken-up. The sample groups are explained, including brief descriptions of their sport and physical demands within each. The researchers detail how these women experience empowerment through physical activity and how they deal with bodily dissatisfaction and objectification

1.1 Feminist Approaches to the Study of Sport

Sport in the United States has often been conceptualized as a male preserve—one in which women as athletes often remain invisible (Cahn 1995; Messner, Duncan, & Willms 2006; Cooky & Lavoie 2012; Antunovic & Hardin 2013). This is to say that the institution of sport has welcomed men more enthusiastically than women (Birrell 2000); has promoted the ideology that men are “naturally” built for sport, which makes women “not naturally” built for sport (Hardin & Whiteside 2010); has maintained male privilege with respect to broadcasting, especially as women’s sport tends to be devalued in televised news media (Messner & Cooky 2010; Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum 2013; Crouse 2013); and has marginalized, trivialized and sexualized the female athlete (Kane 2013). As Wolter (2013, p.3) writes:

The premise of this [line of scholarship] is that sport has historically been considered a masculine endeavor ... [and] when women participate in sport and challenge hegemonic masculinity [over sport] they are often met with resistance. Resistance includes tactics such as (1) media coverage that does not

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cover/underrepresents female participation in sports or minimizes female athletes' accomplishments through language in articles/commentary on games or (2) labeling female athletes [with] stigmatizing labels.

Thus, a feminist perspective is ultimately necessary to contest the ways by which sport promotes and privileges male dominance. While "sporting feminism" has a long and varied history (please see Markula 2005), the core grounding orientation is to be considered "a critical analysis of the cultural forces that work to produce the ideological practices that influence the relations of sport and gender" (Birrell 1998:492); "it is a commitment to... the interpretation of sport as a gendered activity" (Birrell 2000: 61). In this regard, feminist scholars have explored the complexities of gender relations in sport ranging from: (1) sex segregation and women's exclusion from (and oppression in) sport (Scruton & Flintoff 2002; Coakley 2009); (2) ideologies that reinforce ethnocentric and sexist characterizations in sport (McCaughney 1997; Markula 2005); (3) critical investigation of issues such as homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality, and the sexualization of female athletes (Buysse & Embser-Herbert 2004; Fuller 2006; Abel-Shedid & Kalman-Lamb 2011; Clavio & Eagleman 2011); as well as, more positively, (4) the sources of empowerment and the extent to which women challenge and change existing sporting inequities (Hargreaves 2000); (5) the creation of alternative and primarily women-only sport-spaces (Donnelly 2011, MacKay & Dallaire 2013), and (6) the recording of women's everyday experiences in sport, including motivations, meanings and significance of sport and exercise for women and the impact of their involvement on the construction of their sense of self identity (Hargreaves 2000; Hardin & Whiteside 2009). In total, these strands of research have been on how women's sporting experiences expose the patriarchal bias in sport and show how women use sport to create alternatives to traditional masculine power relations.

1.2 Grounding Concepts

One of the more powerful scholarly venues of "sporting feminism" has been the investigation of historical narratives that imagine and present female bodies as inevitably weak,

vulnerable, and inferior (Hargreaves 1994). For instance, Young (1990) suggests that girls do not develop a relationship with their bodies as agents and as instruments of action. Hence, women learn to “throw like a girl,” which is to withhold strength or approach physical tasks in a timid manner. Here, our article is conceptually grounded within the historical precedent that women have traditionally lacked power in relation to their bodies and within their bodies—a phenomenon manifested in experiences of bodily alienation and insecurity (Brace-Govan 2002; Lillmakka 2011).

In writing about conceptions of femininity and bodily strength, sport scholar, Martha McCaughey (1998) found that women themselves tended to view physical strength and femininity as non-complementary. She writes that: “women often view femininity as an obstacle to competent physical aggression...they [have] a fear of hurting people, a physical hesitancy, and a disbelief in their own physical power” (McCaughey 1998, pp. 281-282). Additional researchers have similarly argued that women are enculturated to acquire a distant and self-conscious relation to their bodies (Allison 1991; Madriz 1997; Ridgeway 2011; Yovosky & Sayer 2013). Young (2005) goes so far as to say that women are socialized to be culturally and physically “handicapped” with limited bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality (p. 42).

Further, as a result of these beliefs, many scholars advocate for a “physical feminism” that challenges these belief systems and transforms women’s consciousness and bodies through rigorous physical experience (McCaughey 1997, 1998; Butler 1998; Brace-Govan 2003, 2004; Roth & Basow 2004; Boyle 2005; Van Ingen 2011). Collectively, these voices argue that strong and able female bodies resist cultural ideology of female passivity and challenge ideology that physical strength, competition, and aggressiveness are unfeminine attributes. As a leading voice in this movement, Hargreaves (1997) reminds us that intellectuals tend to interrogate female empowerment (e.g., mental and symbolic empowerment) separately from bodily physical power – and that researchers should also study the use of “bone, muscle, blood materiality” as a score of strength and liberation (p. 33). Thus, we heed her call and

investigate the various ways in which physical action and corporeal sport may act as a vehicle for bodily empowerment.

Finally, we are also interested in the notion of “the gaze” and seek female athletes’ resistance strategies in relation to the gaze. The concept of the gaze was brought into popular usage by Lacan (1981) to describe the anxious state that comes with the awareness that one is being viewed. Here, Lacan argued that the critical effect of being gazed at that the individual loses a degree of personal dignity, autonomy, and agency upon realizing that he or she has become a visible object. In contemporary context, the gaze is often defined as a voyeuristic stare where one’s body is turned into an erotized object for the viewer’s pleasure (Mulvey1975). The importance of this for sport is that as sport is a human activity in which the body is the object of most intense scrutiny, the athlete’s body becomes “the focus of not only the person who inhabits it but also spectators, trainers, and owners” (Bessnier&Brownell 2012, p. 444). Further, for women’s sport, this concept is most crucial because, as research indicates, female athletes are often looked at as sex objects whether they want to be seen that way or not. Further in this regard, female athletes are typically judged more by their appearance than athletic performance (Eitzen 2012; Weber and Carini 2012; Crouse 2013). Thus, in this way, the female athletic body is always on display with increased opportunities for being objectified and gazed upon—which is, to be critiqued and judged and by others, often using sexist cultural evaluations of beauty (Macnevin 2003). Here then we are interested in how female athletes have experienced the gaze and what their strategies have been in resisting the gaze and bodily objectification from spectators.

2. Methodology

The selected methodology for this study was grounded theory. Grounded theory is appropriate when there is a dearth of knowledge in the area of interest, when the social issue under investigation is complex, or when the research foci and questions of investigation are not yet fully known to the investigators (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Inherent in the

method is the potential for identifying the unique and central concern of participants in a particular context or set of circumstances and how they resolve that problem. To this end, we the researchers, knew that we wanted to explore the shared experiences females athletes in full contact sport, but the core focus of how these female athletes used sport to disrupt misogynist discourses and facilitate empowering body experiences, did not emerge until we were “grounded” in the field. Consequently, the method fit well with the purpose and emergent goals of the study.

We began our study by grounding ourselves in the sporting-worlds of the athletes. Here we conducted approximately 50 hours of fieldwork and focused observations of the athletes at their training grounds, personal practices, and event competitions. Observing athletes in practice and game settings provided rich data about the nature of game play, team cohesion, and athlete-fan interactions. Such qualitative approaches also helped us develop rapport with the team as they saw us spending considerable time “hanging out” and supporting the team in practice and game settings. During the first several weeks of observation with the athletes in their various settings, our interactions were at “arm’s length.” We remained fairly unobtrusive and our vocalizations were simple, yet heartfelt, encouraging remarks for their hard work, physical expenditures, and team play. In this regard, we attempted to craft a supportive presence for we knew that these initial impressions would be crucial to the success of the research project.

Following these initial periods of hanging out and being observed, we began to reach out and ask athletes for interviews. Interviewees were gathered through a variety of techniques. First, after rapport had been established by hanging out at practices and derby bouts, we simply reached out to athletes who seemed most receptive to us (we selected persons that greeted us, spoke to us, or acknowledged us in some way). Next, using snowball sampling, we asked these persons to recommend other players to be interviewed. In some cases, based on these recommendations, we used Facebook to contact athletes and asked them if we could

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interview them at a time and place most conducive to their schedules. All interviews were face-to-face and lasted between 1 hour and 2 and ½ hours, with the average interview being approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes long. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed.

All total, the authors also conducted 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female athletes (7 interviews with derby athletes, four interviews with female fighters from various mixed-martial-artist gyms, and six interviews with female rugby players). The majority of the women were in their mid-twenties and early thirties—though the age range of our participants included women in their early twenties to late forties. Beyond this, the women were also fairly homogenous regarding ethnicity and social class position—all identified as Caucasian and most were from middle-class and working class families. The majority of the interviews and observations were held in two neighboring mid-western U.S. metropolitan cities from May to November 2013. Specifically, derby athletes were members of a club team located in Topeka, Kansas. Similarly, MMA athletes were members of two separate fighting gyms also located in Topeka. Rugby members were student-athletes of the University of Kansas women's rugby team.

While we did not approach the field with specific hypotheses, we did employ guiding, open-ended questions regarding their experiences in the sport, their recruitment and training, their motivations for participation, and their perceptions, constructions, and unique challenges of being female both in and out of their sporting culture. Our observational guideposts and interview questions were continually modified based on observations and experiences in the field and during our interviews (see Strauss & Corbin 1990). Our questions and data themes acted as a feedback loop to restructure and solidify our prominent interview and observational guides which ultimately ended up focusing on bodily empowerment, experiences with the “gaze,” and strategies used to disrupt heterosexist and misogynist actions.

Before interviewing participants, all procedures were

approved by our university's Institutional Review Board and Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans. Participants were informed of the goals and procedures of this work and of their rights—particularly whether or not participants' names would be used in the study or whether pseudonyms would be substituted, as well as the right to review material and the right to withdraw from the process.

In the sections that follow, we examine this notion of empowerment (in its various forms) through sport participation. Specifically, we describe the physicality and bodywork required of athletes in the athletic venues of roller derby, mixed-martial-arts, and rugby. Additionally, we detail how these athletes describe and “do” empowerment as well as how they resist elements of the gaze and bodily objectification

3. Roller Derby

Described as a game in which skaters simulate bumper cars (Cohen & Barbee 2010), roller derby, when broken down to its basics, is a fairly simple game to understand. A roller derby “bout” is composed of two teams. Each team has a “jammer,” a player designated to race. Jammers earn points by successfully breaking through a pack of the rival team’s “blockers.” There are two 30-minute halves, during which each team fields five women at a time in shifts (called jams) that last up to two minutes. They skate counterclockwise around an oval track, slightly smaller in circumference than a basketball court. There’s one jammer per shift who scores a point each time she laps an opposing skater. After her first, non-scoring pass through the opposing team, the leading jammer also has the strategic option of ending the jam prematurely by tapping her hands to her hips to prevent the other team from having the opportunity to score points of their own. The other eight players skate in a pack and make judicious use of their hips and arms to clear space for their jammer while stymieing the opposing jammer’s efforts. Players are allowed to hit each other, hard, in shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip blocks. Further, with a continuous jostling for position, players’ hips, thighs, upper arms and

front torsos are often in constant contact. Although fist fighting and elbowing incur penalties, skaters may move in front of other skaters (“body” or “booty-blocking”) as well as thrust their bodies against other skaters in hopes of knocking them to the floor (“body checking”).

3.1 The Joy of Hitting: Finding Strength in the Body

Because roller derby is fast-paced with hard hits, many women cite this as part of the attraction. For instance, “Lady Ricochet,” one of our athlete interviewees indicated, “I like to hit people. It’s a great feeling... and such a stress relief.... I tell the girls to hit me as hard as they can... where else can you do this and not get in trouble?” Similarly “Seam-Rip-Her” stated:

These women... just beat the crap out of each other. I mean they're brutal to each other (laughs). [But] that's just roller derby...these women just destroy each other and I'm like Whoa! It's crazy but [hitting one another] is an outlet. Seeing these women, they're playing each other, I see them at practice scrimmaging and one girl would hit a girl really hard and she'd have a hard time getting up and be like, 'that was such a good hit.' But really she almost killed her (laughs).

Likewise, “Ruthless Benedict” offered:

In roller derby aggression and strength is normalized, expected ... I mean some of the women on the team work in clerical, in medical records... have kids... and in every life if they were to freak out (makes gesture of turning into the incredible hulk) that would be problematic ... but derby can be an outlet to the stresses on normal life.

Theberge (2000) noted that many female athletes found significant enjoyment in hitting and Thing (2001) claimed that female athletes’ physically aggressive contact created a feeling of empowerment that involved “both a sense of bodily power and liberation and a sense of release of everyday

stresses” (p. 284, emphasis in original). Additionally, Mccaughey (1997) notes that women have historically been told to experience their bodies as “fragile encumbrances rather than as tools with which to get something done” (p. 92). Yet, roller derby clearly provides a space in which women feel as though they “get something done” and enjoy a sense of physical empowerment. For example, please consider, the following:

I got my derby name ‘Lady Ricochet’ because when I first started I couldn't skate and I would bounce off everything and everyone... but now after playing for a couple of years my body negotiation/control is great... It's amazing how it [derby] transfers over to other aspects of life. At my [bar and restaurant] job, I will dance and skate between servers and customers and it's amazing how much the new athleticism helps.

I was never an athlete. My mom didn't allow I me to play sports when I was young due to her fear that I would get hurt... I danced when I was younger, but never contact sports. With derby there's something about being able to give and take a hit... having the girls tell you things like ‘great hit’ and ‘hit me harder’ is awesome...it helps push you and you feel like you are in control of your body (Ruthless Benedict).

Consistent with the literature (Shaw 1994; Mccaughey1997; Theberge 2000; Van Ingen 2011) and as evidenced by players' comments, many women feel empowered by the opportunity for strong physical contact and derive pleasure from such physical expressions. Indeed derby, unlike many other women's sports, is a contact sport played by athletes who use their bodies as “instrument[s] of physical power and aggression” (Kane and Snyder, 1989. p.93). Further, derby is a sport that allows women to gain bodily empowerment, through “a positive redefinition of the body and the feeling wherein one is less alienated and insecure in her body and in her bodily world relation” (Lillmakka 2011, p. 442).

3.2 Overcoming Alienation: Greater Bodily Acceptance

While derby players cite pleasure in hitting and the physical expressions that derby demands, the sport can also be a vehicle through which players reevaluate (and positively reexamine) their own bodily images. Though female athletes may continue to acknowledge the existence of the societal ideal female body image (which is often considered an unhealthy and unrealistic body type), they also denote that derby provided an arena in which a more realistic body type was accepted and in many cases necessary to the sport.

In most cases derby players cited the sport as legitimatizing their physique (or elements of their physique) as an effective tool necessary to excel in derby. In particular, the “rear-end” is one of the most widely discussed body parts in the sport. As (Calson 2010, p. 434-435) writes:

In derby, the booty is a weapon and an entire move—the booty block—highlights the use of one’s butt to block an opponent... Skaters talk about their rear-ends in a myriad of ways: how useful they can be when they are big (e.g., “I need a bigger ass block to block her”), how fast they can move (e.g., “Move your ass in front of her!”), how well they block (e.g., “Look at that booty block!”), and how soft they are when skaters fall (e.g., “It’s okay [I’m not injured], I just landed on my ass”). As such, skaters resignify butts in terms of how they can be used rather than simply how they look.

When our interviewees discussed the size and appearance of their bodies (and butts and legs), they usually expressed increased satisfaction. For example, one blocker commented:

I’m really tall on my skates and I’m really good at getting my butt in the way of jammers. [Derby can] make yourself feel better about your body– it’s strategically better for you to have a bigger butt in roller derby. I used to have an eating disorder when I was teenager and I’ve always hated my body until playing roller derby, [now] having a big ass is a wonderful thing. And being really healthy and having extra muscles and having a bit of extra weight on

you is really good as a blocker. I feel in control of my body now. Not having an eating disorder anymore and having a better body image with the experience I've had, they all come together to make me feel really powerful. I feel awesome when I'm on the track.

Likewise, another skater offered:

Derby has changed me in different ways. I've always had self-esteem issues and this culminated in a bit of an eating disorder and derby really helped with that...it's been a self-esteem boost... you get to put on tight tights regardless of your body type and you can go out there and look awesome and you feel awesome and you play awesome... playing derby makes me feel better about my body.

Research indicates that women have a tendency to engage in negative commentary about their weight and shape of their own bodies. In particular, research has found that women are most concerned with the size of their thighs, buttocks, and hips; the areas primarily associated with weight gain (Moore 1988; Monteath & McCabe 1997; Thomsen, Bower, & Barnes 2004). Further, the frequency with which women engage in negative body talk is positively correlated with body dissatisfaction and eating disordered behavior (Salk and Engeln-Maddox 2011). In this context, the play of derby, if nothing else, helped to disrupt the cycle of negative body talk and bodily dissatisfaction. Derby seems to provide an alternate system of body evaluation based on how bodies move and perform rather than simply how they look, thereby allowing skaters to experience their bodies in ways beyond the forms of passive embodiment encouraged by traditional cultural norms.

3.3 Engaging and Switching the Focus of the Gaze

The sport of derby is quite unique for it is arguably one of the only sports where the players make the discourse of "the gaze," beauty, and the cultural standard of femininity a central component. For example, contemporary derby athletes have the freedom to create new personas, take stage

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names, and sport individualized theatrical, campy, and often sexualized “boutfits” which put women’s sexuality and bodies on display (Cohen 2008; Finley 2010).

As noted in the grounding concepts section, female athletes are often looked at as sex objects whether they want to be seen that way or not, and unfortunately female athletes are typically judged more by their appearance than athletic performance (Weber and Carini 2012; Crouse 2013). Likewise, this is (more or less) true regarding our observations of derby. Initially, the venue seemingly represents a repository of heterosexist male values that perpetuate gendered inequalities and puts bodies on display for the gaze of the audience. Yet derby athletes attempt to use this to their advantage to flip the script—to seduce viewership not just through the “revealed body” but also through athletic play. In pre-bout actions, the derby athletes exist in space where they act (and are perceived) more like “derby girls” -- where traditional notions of femininity are “on display” and the girls “perform” gender for the gaze of the audience. But once a bout has begun, they transition from being sexy ladies (and perhaps sex objects) to derby women/athletes where these traditional gendered notions are challenged through aggression, strength, and explicit demonstrations of power.

Dressing sexily and engaging the fantasy gaze of the audience has been described by some of our interviewees as a “bait and switch” technique. As one interviewee stated, “Come for the babes, stay for the beatings [the athletic competition].” She continues:

Dressing sexy, I think, is the reality and effort of having to get ‘butts in the seats’... emphasizing this sexy femininity is a technique to get people out to see ‘hot chicks’ beat on each other... but the hope is that they stay because they see that these girls are real athletes (Rink owner).

Several derby athletes seemingly give support to this philosophy:

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I want to look hot for my husband and for the crowd... but dressing sexy is really a byproduct of needing to be sleek and athletic... I mean when you get done, you look like ass...I don't feel very sexy during a bout... I'm out there being aggressive and doing anything I can to win (Seam-Rip-Her).

Before a bout you are thinking about “your look” and what you plan to show off—like your tattoos or other aspects of your body... but once the game begins, you are thinking only about strategy and the game itself...and I hope that the people who come to a bout see it as a sport. How could they not? We are out there [engaging] in a really challenging and physical sport,(Ruthless Benedict)

Obviously, the meaning of roller derby players' eroticized presentations is dependent on the viewer's interpretation and reception context. Here we are suggesting that female athletes actively perform, to various degrees, sexualized images of femininity in order to put “butts in the seats.” However, through the mere nature of game play, the skaters flip the script, showing that women can be physically powerful and engaging athletes. This is akin to what Gill (2003) has termed the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, which relies on a distinction between women being objectified, and women freely and “with agency” choosing to objectify themselves, at their own discretion and for their own purposes. Again, in our observations, this technique seemed somewhat successful—but this is something that deserves additional investigation with direct audience engagement. If nothing else this reminds us that derby skaters (like female athletes in general) often feel pressure to exploit sexuality as one of the forms of power available to them and it retells the old and complex story of the contradictory norms surrounding gender and female athleticism.

4. Mixed Martial Artists

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a sport involving intense combat between two opponents who use a variety of fighting techniques, including classic martial art systems, boxing, and wrestling. MMA is classified as a combat sport because

competitors win a contest by subduing their opponents within an established set of regulations. MMA athletes are referred to as “fighters.” During a fight, fighters can engage each other like boxers or martial artists, punching and kicking, or like wrestlers grappling on the mat. A fighter can win a match in four ways: by forcing the opponent to submit (“tap out”), by rendering the opponent unconscious (“knock out”), by prompting the referee to stop the fight (“technical knockout”), or by achieving more points than the opponent based on the judges’ decision.

To date, a few attempts have been made to explore in greater depth the world of the female MMA fighter (see: Spencer 2009; Holthuysen 2012). Indeed the sporting world of MMA is so heavily dominated by male athletes (and with marketing campaigns targeted specifically toward men) women have just begun to carve out their own place in the sport.

4.1 Objectification and Barriers to Participation

Unlike roller derby (which is female dominated at all levels and open to all adult women), female MMA fighters have to negotiate multiple barriers (and often male gatekeepers) in order to participate and compete. One of the strongest barriers to participation is the often sexualizing and infantilizing expressions held by the public that refuse to take them seriously as fighters. For example, in several fights, we witnessed the referee and various ring officials hug and pat the head of female fighters– this behavior was not witnessed with male fighters. Further, one of our interviewees stated that the first time she went to the gym to inquire about fighting, she was asked if she would rather be a ring girl. She stated:

[The trainer] said to me, “are you sure you want to fight - you would look good in a bikini.” I said the last thing I wanted to do was parade around in a bikini. I’m here to fight. [The trainer] said again, “ring girls get noticed it’s good if you want to be an aspiring model”... I reiterated that I wanted to fight (Fighter interview 2013).

Often, the duty of the ring girl in the sport of MMA is to provide a source for sexual desire and entice the gaze of the audience. As Holthuysen (2011, p.153) notes, “the ring girl is there to promote the fantasy of sexual promise and fantasy of the perfection of female beauty.” The ring girl appears at the end of each round holding a sign signifying the round and they are almost always wearing revealing outfits, such as bikinis. Ironically, it is the ring girls who are often the most visible women who inhabit the world of MMA. Even when there are female MMA matches, the ring girls are still brought out between rounds to reinforce conventional female beauty and roles. The ring girl/female fighter dynamic is further confused by the fact that female fighters (in amateur bouts) will earn no money. This is contrasted by the reality that ring girls generally earn a profit through direct monetary payments or through the awarding of material gifts. For example, one fight promoter under the purview of this investigation, held a bikini contest one week before a scheduled fight, with the grand prizewinner being named an “honorary ring girl,” and receiving a \$300 cash prize. Thus one of the grand contradictions in the world of MMA is that the most visible (and most rewarded) women continue to be ring girls and not the fighters themselves.

Indeed, this contradiction was noted in the first author’s field notes, following his attendance as an audience member:

What a strange mixed message... at one level we are here to celebrate the skill, art, and strength of women fighters – yet their presence is distracted (and potentially negated) by the women in bikinis whose bodies are on display to emphasize their sexuality... I wonder what the female fighters think about this?

These contradictions were also noted by Tabitha, another fighter we interviewed. She stated:

It’s bullshit. I want to be taken seriously as a fighter... some girls do this to get noticed, to get into photo-shoots or to model, etc... They have the right to [try to launch their careers this way] but I’m here to fight [and stuff like this] makes it harder for women to be taken seriously. I was doing an

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interview with a guy who was writing a story on female fighters... but he wasn't taking it or me seriously. Instead of asking about my record, or my training, or my fighting technique, he wanted to talk about my boobs and asked me if I'd ever "farted" on a girl during a fight... I stared him down and just walked out of the interview.

Similarly Holly, commented:

It's frustrating. Matchmakers and fight promoters don't really look at your record or your potential as a fighter. They look to see if you have a pretty face and whether or not your opponent is pretty... that is how they want to set up fights... they want to sell tickets based on this "girl on girl" hot action... Most fights between female fighters are better fights because we are more technical – guys will just get up there and "swing away" at each other... but that doesn't seem to matter... promoters see us as hair, faces, and boobs... we have to work ten times harder to be taken seriously as fighters.

4.2 Techniques: How to be Taken Seriously

Following the above comments we asked the fighters what techniques and strategies they used to be taken seriously and fight against these forms of objectification. In response, both cited their bodywork and commitment to hard work. Tabitha said:

At first the guys wouldn't hit me...I had to challenge them. First, when they refused to hit me, I'd hit them as hard as I could and force them to hit me back... they get mad you know and hit back... then I'd reassert my level of commitment to the sport. I'd say: "how do you expect me to get any better if you don't take me seriously? Treat me like a fighter."

Similarly, Kat said that she would have to outmuscle and out train all of the men in the gym to be taken seriously:

I was doing fitness tests with a group of 40 guys and they mocked the idea that "a girl" was going to lead them...the head trainer said, "be careful guys,

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you don't want to piss her off"... anyway the group of guys challenged me to a "pull up" contest. I did 20 perfect pull ups in a row—more than all of the 40 guys—only two guys came close with 19... So yeah, its about having to constantly prove yourself, but now all the guys in the gym want to train with me because with me they know they're going to get a good workout with a focus on excellent form and technique.

Lastly, Loni expressed having to prove herself as a fighter and not as a "pretty face who's here to flirt with the guys." She said:

A lot of girls come here, not to train, but to workout and flirt with the guys... How did I show that I was different? I'd go "balls-to-the-wall" every time... Because, I'm small people think I'm a pushover, but I'd wrestle with the guys without hesitation... I'll fight anyone (laughs).

This is backed up by her coach who repeated the phrase, "she's mean man... she's mean," and by Gary, one of her training partners, who said, "She'll go toe-to toe with you. She gained the respect of the gym quickly by 'bringing it' it to the fights every time."

Indeed, the female fighters who were most respected in the gym were the ones who expressed a strong degree of "female masculinity." Female masculinity is generally defined as an enactment of masculine values by female bodies in which women become primary actors of masculine principles (Halberstam 1998). In our observations of training sessions, the female fighters did exert a focused intensity that was often greater than that of the majority of the male participants. Subverting gendered stereotypes and expectations; the female fighters took fewer breaks and refused (more so than not) invitations to interact socially and gossip – and it was clear that they had the respect of the gym and were viewed as "one of guys." The female fighters did speak as women, but more often than not they did not do so while in the gym – their femininity was either implicit or completely removed from their constructed identities while

training

4.3 Personalized Benefits of Bodily Empowerment

Similar to the expressions offered by the derby athletes, our MMA interviewees stated that their chosen sport helped them gain greater physical confidence (and increased emotional well-being). All of the female fighters noted a change in their body image and the way they conceived of and used their body. For example, Loni stated that she once battled an eating disorder and that she would starve herself to lose weight. Indeed, contemporary gender scholars (Bordo 1993; Macnevin 2003) identify that slender bodies have come to represent the ideal woman in modern-day Western culture; and Loni, in responding to these immense cultural pressures, went to great lengths to monitor her thinness. However, through MMA, she says that she has replaced her eating disorder with a love of training, which forces a rigid program of healthy eating, and has “carved out” a strong, more muscular body that brings her pleasure. Similarly, Holly stated that she never felt as though her body “fit” cultural norms until she starting training in MMA. She told us that with her broad shoulders and her “strong looking” arms, people would often mock her as being male. For example, she said that members of her cheerleading squad would target her with commentary like, “when did a man join the team?” However, through MMA, she is celebrated for her strong physique and is confident in her body and with the physical and mental strength she gained through training.

Additionally, MMA training has created a vehicle through which to exorcise fear and gain a degree of physical and social courage. The majority of the women interviewed revealed to us that they experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner or family member. After being abused by a boyfriend, Loni sought out MMA to help her “better defend herself.” Similarly, Tabitha said it was a way of coping with generalized anxiety and a way to channel the “rage” she felt from parental abuse and neglect experienced at an early age. She stated:

[As a result of MMA] I’m no longer afraid to be

around people I don't know... I can walk into a room without fear – I feel more confident. It's ironic, because I would always get into fights, if somebody looked at me wrong, or if they said something I would "go" (meaning to fight). But MMA training has become a form of anti-violence for me. If confronted, I'll defend myself. But, if somebody says something to me, or tries to pick a fight, I'll just walk away. The training has calmed me...I'm no longer constantly angry.

In similar fashion, Holly said:

I grew up with a lot of abuse and I never fought back. I just smiled and took it and let everyone walk all over me... I remember the first time I was in a sparring session with [a training partner] and we were doing hitting drills... I couldn't hit back ... I was so socialized to "just take it" that I broke down crying... my coach had a heart-to-heart with me and I told him everything about my past... He talked about using the anger I held purposively –he said I needed to release the anger with every punch... it was cleansing and now I can hit back and I'm good at it... I'm much more at peace now.

With the aid of MMA, our fighters took control over aspects of their personal lives by cultivating a method by which to claim their fear and anger and work on developing tools to face it constructively. Moreover, these women acknowledge their current bodies as a kind of social and physical capital. They are conscious of using their bodies to realize the social psychological benefits of greater self-esteem, self-focused motives, and controlled aggression.

5. Women's Rugby

Rugby is one of the roughest and most demanding of team sports. The sport is similar to American football in that players are allowed to kick, pass, or run with an oval-shaped ball down the field. The defense uses tackles to prevent the offense from progressing down the field, and a team can score when they touch the ball down in the opponent's "try zone" or when a kick goes through the uprights. Unlike football however, play is continuous (without stops or time-

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outs), passes can only be made laterally or backward, and the only protective gear typically worn by players is a mouth guard. Additionally, an identifiable characteristic of rugby is the scrum, in which eight players of the same team bind together tightly and oppose the other team's scrum by trying to drive them back over the ball. The sport of rugby demands a high level of strength, speed, endurance, agility and aggression and there is a high risk of injury. Getting bruised and battered and using one's body to bruise and batter is a core reality of the sport. Thus said, as central to work, we query what women "get" of out playing, and what tactics they use to overcome alienation and to be taken seriously as athletes.

5.1 Physical Play as Bodily Empowerment

The nature of the sport requires participants to tackle, hit, grab, push and generally attempt to control others through using their bodies. These bodily actions are often cited as being physically empowering. For example, Sarah said:

The forwards (blockers) say that what they love the most is hitting... I think it's empowering for them...its fun...the enjoyment comes from using your body to overpower an opponent.

Forwards, Shelby, Sarina, and Erica support this statement.

I love tackling people. That's absolutely my favorite thing... I love the controlled violence of it ... its socially accepted form of aggression... It makes me feel strong, like a badass (Shelby).

I like the contact ... the notion of hitting and tackling appeals to me because I like how it makes me feel... makes me feel physical and strong...like a badass (Sarina).

I love that I get to hit bitches (laughs)... you know when someone says, "I'm so mad that I could hit a wall—well, I actually get to... with rugby I can take out all of my anger... it's a great stress relief... it's

more healthy than bottling it all up ... plus I feel more like a badass (Erica).

It is interesting that all three of these ruggers used the phrasing, “like a badass,” when discussing how rugby made them feel. Here the muscle, physical strength, and toughness gained through rugby helped conceptualize new identities and body schemas that stood for confidence and acted as an attribution of social power.

5.2 Physical Conceptions of the Body

Further, the experience of being physical also influenced how our interviewees interpreted the physical presentation of their bodies. These athletes, more often than not, expressed positive perceptions of their own bodies and had an increased acceptance of their muscular shape. For example Sarina offered the following stories:

I use to have an eating disorder... It was due to seeing my older sister who was such a beautiful “girly-girl.” I would watch her get ready in the morning ... she was so slender and had big boobs and her clothes would make her look so thin and attractive... I would get her clothes in a hand-me-down fashion and they wouldn’t fit or look right on me –at least not how they looked on her—and I would get so depressed and cry... But now, through rugby, I’m really happy with my body... I work out six times a week and eat healthy... the other day someone took a picture of me running and I really liked it... you could see my leg muscles flexed and I looked really strong.

We were at a party and there were all these “blonde skinny sorority types.” The girls looked so lithe and I started feeling self-conscious about my exposed [muscular] arms and my friend who also plays rugby turned to me, flexed her arms, and said, “don't worry we can take all of them down.” This made me feel much better... now I evaluate people [give them status/respect] less on how they look

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and whether or not I think I can take them down (laughs).

Similarly Erica offered:

We shouldn't do it, but we often make fun of "sorority types"—they all seem so "cookie cutter." They look like they all came from the same mold: same hair, same fashion sense, skinny and girly... but I suppose what we are really doing is making fun of conformity and the "feminine ideal" —you know, this cultural pressure to conform to a standard look... I was in a sorority and I hated it because I felt as though I couldn't be myself ... I like to tell inappropriate jokes, and act like a little boy (to express and enjoy "potty humor") ... I'm a bit weird (laughs) and I felt pressure to "just be quiet" and be feminine... I felt out of place and that I was constantly being judged for not acting right... so I quit and joined rugby where everyone's weird, but accepting and open-minded.

Additionally, ruggers collectively valued the diversity of player sizes and body types. For example, Haley and Shelby stated:

Rugby requires different and disparate body types... Big and small bodies all find use on the team (Haley).

We will take any body type and physical type... You need a wide variety of physical types to play rugby... You need bigger more muscular girls to block and tackle who work to get the ball to the smaller speedsters who score (Shelby).

Thus, in constructions similar to derby, the rugby interviewees tend to make positive body evaluations based more on their use and functionally regarding strength and speed, rather than appraising them in terms of thinness or corpulence.

5.3 Physical Play as Mental Empowerment

The play of rugby also helped transform the consciousness of several players and granted them a form of

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psychological transformation and self-efficacy. Consider the following comments:

I really love the physical and mental challenge of rugby... I don't like getting hit, but when I do there is something empowering about being able to get back up after you've been knocked down... it's a psychological thing but also a metaphor of life... to get hit and keep going is something special (Sarah).

Rugby makes you mentally tough... I've gotten my "shit rocked" on the pitch, but it's empowering to know that when you get knocked down, you get back up... Playing rugby makes me feel like I can do anything (Kristyn).

Since playing rugby I'm a lot more confident... and this is going to sound funny, but I kind of feel invincible. I will go jogging by myself when it is dark... I'm cautious and smart about my surroundings but I won't let fear dictate where I go or what I do... I feel that I can outrun someone [if they try to attack me while running] or that I can take them down if need be... I really am less fearful of things and I feel that if I can do this [meaning rugby] I tell myself that I can do almost anything... so yeah, it transfers over into aspects of your life, like school... it becomes a mental thing where I tell myself that I can do it...that I can be successful (Erica).

I rejected the idea of playing rugby at first because I didn't want people to judge me... I didn't want them to think that I was a lesbian or judge me for being too masculine... I used to worry all the time what people thought of me, but now I'm over that, now I don't care what people think of me... Playing rugby makes me feel strong and confident about myself... (Sarina).

The interviewed rugby athletes supported and gave credence to the notion that physical play can lead to increased confidence and new realizations about physical and mental capabilities. This physical expression can lead one to see their body and the surrounding world differently,

thus increasing the feeling that one can cope with tasks related to the sport and with everyday situations that exist beyond rugby.

5.4 Challenges: Overcoming Hegemonic Femininity

The term hegemonic femininity refers to the various cultural and social expectations that proscribe women to exhibit traits such as submissiveness, dependency, and fragility (Schippers 2007). Here, our rugby players recounted many messages regarding the hegemonic femininity and the belief of fragility of women who play rugby. Players said that acquaintances, friends, and in some cases family members, expressed a form of paternalism, arguing that the risk of physical injury in rugby was too great for a woman. Many of these persons were unsupportive or questioning of their participation in rugby. Consider the following examples:

I often get told—usually by men—that I’m too small to play rugby... They will question my durability, etc. I tell them I love the game, and they’ll say things like, “yeah, but you’ll get hurt” ... I love the game... why is it that I get questioned for loving the game, yet men never have to defend their love of the sport? (Sarah).

My father played rugby and when I told him I was interested in playing, he got angry and dismissive... he said I’d get hurt and that it was too brutal...[but] I’ve always been athletic...I’ve boxed, played soccer, golfed... But I did play and have been doing so for eight seasons... When I’d come over to pick up my cleats and gear, he just assumed it was for soccer... it was easier for him to think that (Haley).

[From our field notes during a sanctioned inter-team rugby match]... we strike up conversation with a male sitting next to us. He informs us that he is there to watch his daughter (Kristyn) and that this is his first time watching rugby. He is supportive of his daughter but says he doesn’t understand the game or his daughter’s interest in it. He states: “It just looks like one giant opportunity for her to really get hurt” ... Kristyn says, “yeah I kept the fact that I was

playing rugby for two seasons from him...because we butt heads over the fact that I play. My dad played college football, but he just doesn't seem to understand why I play...he's afraid I'll get hurt. It's frustrating because I'm a lot like him...I love the contact...it makes me feel like a badass (Kristyn).

Women respond to this paternalism and this judgmental protective gaze in a number of ways: First, there was simply no apologizing for their participation in the sport of rugby. Scholars have noted a tendency for female athletes to apologize for their involvement in deeply physical sport by overemphasizing aspects of their femininity (Choi 2000). However, this did not apply to the rugby athletes interviewed. There was no "female apologetic" regarding their involvement in sport and no apparent playing-up of traditional or hegemonic notions of femininity. They simply played and relied on their teammates for moral and social support. Consider the following examples:

I was walking through the student union during new student orientation and the rugby club had set up a recruitment table. When I walked past them somebody at the table yelled, "Hey, you want to play rugby. You look like you could hit some bitches" ... I grew up in a very conservative and traditional family, and I was always afraid that I wasn't a good person because I didn't live up to expectations of being a "good girl" because I didn't look, act, or feel traditionally feminine...now I'm comfortable in my own skin... this is because of my family—the team has since become my family... These women amazed me—they were living full happy lives, they did what they wanted and they didn't apologize for their behavior or for who they were¹ (Shelby).

¹ Shelby tells a very powerful and moving story about having felt "like a bad person" because she didn't conform to cultural standards of femininity. As noted, she grew up in a very conservative household with entrenched and negative views toward counterhegemonic females and homosexuality. She said that her rugby team gave her support and the confidence to "be who she was." She eventually came out as gay to her biological family because she said that if her biological family rejected her, she would always have the love and support of her new family (her rugby team). In fact, all of the players we interviewed drew the parallel to the team as a "family." For example, one rugger, Kristyn, summed it up best when she said: "My teammates are my family...we know that we have each other's backs no matter what." Taken collectively, these stories, and similar offerings from other ruggers on the team, give credence to the team's supportive structure and loving fellowship.

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My mom hates that I play rugby. The one match she came to, she sat with her back to the game the entire time... she says that I am too small to play and that I'll get hurt... but I think the thing that she's most upset with is that I'm not a "girly-girl"... she and my sister used to lay out my outfits—you know dresses and stuff like that... I always wanted to wear shorts and play in the mud...She thinks that this is not what a girl should be...My rugby family on the other hand is so supportive... I mean I do love my parents and my biological sisters, but their views on femininity and gender are outdated and backwards—so I use rugby to challenge my family's understanding of sex and gender and educate them on issues of diversity and acceptance. Those who don't understand rugby think it's barbaric but what's really barbaric are these backwards views of what women should look like and be (Erica).

5.5 Challenging the Protective Gaze through the Celebration of Injury

Rugby athletes also challenged notions of paternalism by flaunting and celebrating the inherent danger of the sport and by frequently discussing bruises, scars, and fractures. As noted in this work, aggressiveness and physical contact has not historically been considered a feminine activity (Finley 2010). Thus, the aggression and the risk of injurious actions are often cited, thereby contesting this outdated notion of femininity. Indeed, ruggers often tell celebratory and salacious stories of injuries witnessed or experienced. Consider:

I witnessed a major injury in my first match. A back was running with the ball and she was tackled out of bounds... I heard a snap and this animalistic screaming... she broke her arm and dislocated her elbow... she had to have surgery and now has this huge scar... its pretty gnarly (Sarah).

From our field notes: Haley is seemingly re-enacting a scene from a Hollywood movie, wherein the "tuff hero" is pointing at body parts and lifting up pieces of clothing to show-off and name all of the bones she has broken in her athletic career – and

they are numerous: a broken nose, a fractured eye socket, bruised and broken ribs, hands, and feet... but in the end, she reminds us that she “loves it”

Indeed, the “wearing” of bruises and scars is a technique female ruggers use to dispute traditional notions of femininity and challenge notions of paternalism. In the world of rugby, wounds exist as badges of honor and for the rugby participants the celebration of injurious risk and toughness challenge dated ideals of femininity. As Erica joked:

When I wear shorts, people can see my bruises and battle wounds. If I’m walking down the street people will stop and ask if I’m okay—they think I’m in an abusive relationship (laughs). I say, no “I’m good” ... “I play rugby.”

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This study focused on the diverse experiences of three groups of women who were dedicated to sport with heavy bodily contact and physical action; specifically, roller derby, mixed-martial arts, and rugby. In this work, we examined and detailed how deep physical activity facilitates empowerment experiences for women. As in all qualitative studies, our research findings are linked to a unique population and these results may not generalize to women athletes in other sports. However, this said we did identify empowering experiences that typically came in three forms: (1) physical empowerment as a result of “discovering” previously unrecognized bodily power and strength through sport; (2) healthy and positive body image articulation through the redefining and signification of the body in terms of how it moves and performs rather than simply how it looks, and (3) growth in confidence and modes of self-expression that carried into women's worlds of work, their personal lives, and additional areas beyond sport. Indeed, the transformative effects of sport on one’s self-concept as well as bodily and mental confidence has been a consistent theme of this paper and is well-documented in the wider body of academic research concerning women’s participation in sport.

Nonetheless, while these women expressed increased

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bodily agency and cognitive freedoms through sport, their participation was not without struggle. Women still had to contend with issues of the audience's sexualized gaze, surveillance, and paternalism. For example, roller derby athletes had to actively perform, to various degrees, sexualized images of femininity in order to get publicity and fan attendance. Once the fan base was "in the door," however, the skaters attempted to flip the script of sexualized voyeurism into broad athletic appreciation showing that women can be physically powerful and engaging athletes rather than mere sex objects. Female MMA fighters on the other hand worked to resist objectification by actively negating any and all elements of traditional femininity. They adopted instead, hyper-masculine codes of advanced work ethic and physical aggressiveness while in the gym. Finally, female rugby players resisted paternalism and hegemonic feminism by openly mocking these codes of submissiveness, dependency, and fragility, and by relying on their teammates for psychosocial support.

Thus, we consider these women to be pioneers. Despite the fact that this paper was researched and written in the United States in the early twenty-first century, these women still pursue their motivations against the gendered and cultural grains, forcing their way into situations in which cultural conventions dictate they do not belong. They use sport, as Judith Butler, a pioneering scholar on gender states:

...to rearticulate gender ideals such that those very athletic women's bodies... are no longer considered outside the norm (too much, too masculine, even monstrous). [Women's sports have the power] over time, to constitute a new ideal of accomplishment and grace, a standard for women's achievement...women's sports offer a site in which this transformation of our ordinary sense of what constitutes a gendered body is itself dramatically contested and transformed (Butler 1998, p. 104).

While it is encouraging to see women participating in physically demanding sports that challenge social conceptions and conventions, it must be remembered that that female athletes still face unique challenges to

participation in sport. The continued efforts to sexualize, force surveillance upon, and limit opportunities for sportswomen continues to be contested terrain, and we wonder how much time will pass before this is no longer the case. Thus, future research should continue to detail women's experiences in sport, including both the joys and challenges of athletic performance. Further, future work must also continue to explore and share the athletic sites and sporting activities that empower women to be competitive, confident, strong, and outspoken. In the end, we thank the athletes for their participation, for the enjoyment of athleticism brought in witnessed competitions, and for their knowing and unknowing efforts to transform society through sport.

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