THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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Department of Sociology
Abstract

of

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Statement of Problem

Sport has traditionally offered limited access to female athletes and has been dominated by the male experience. Academic research has long documented the challenges of female athletes to manage their incongruent identities of female and athlete and the pressure placed on these athletes to accentuate their femininity both on and off the court. The rise of professional women’s athletics in the United States brings new focus to the experience of the female athlete as she is asked to both excel in her sport AND maintain her femininity all the while maintaining the importance of the male gaze to the legitimacy of women’s sports.

Sources of Data

The research utilizes secondary data analysis from thirty-five in-depth, face-to-face interviews with female football players gathered over a three-year period between 2003 and 2006.

Conclusions Reached

This research affirms that female athletes continue to be challenged by the social pressure to conform to the ideals of femininity while also working towards attaining legitimacy for women’s
sport. The intersection of female athlete with the male dominated sport of football (American football) provides a unique perspective to study the experience of the female athlete including gender, assumed sexuality, and the feminine apologetic. It points to the objectification of women to attain acceptance while simultaneously calling into question the athletic prowess of the athlete by centering on the importance of the male gaze.

_______________________, Committee Chair
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To my Mom for always supporting me and encouraging me to move forward. To Mary for challenging me to take this on and for all the support along the way. And, of course, to Tess for supporting me to the bitter end with words of encouragement and understanding.
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An Introduction to Sport in the United States

Sport has become big business in the United States. Print, radio, and television media provide daily coverage of sports from the professional level all the way down to the high school level. People across the country are daily consumers and participants in sport for a variety of reasons; the joy of play, to stay in shape, the desire to compete, etc. While sport in its most basic sense is an activity of recreation it is also steeped with social meaning and is part of an elaborate process of socialization. It is this deeper meaning of sport and women’s professional sports that is the subject of this research.

Women’s significant participation in sports in the United States has a relatively short history compared to their male counterparts. While women were participating in sport many years before the passage of Title IX of the education amendments of 1972, its passage supplied a boost to women’s participation in educationally sanctioned sports by vaguely directing that there be equal opportunities for men and women in programs receiving public funds (Hogan 1979). While there is little doubt that Title IX has played a role in the expansion of women’s sports in the United States it can also be said that this landmark legislation has left much to be desired for women’s athletics.

The enforcement of Title IX was often difficult and required much persistence, patience, and at times, even legal prowess on the part of individual(s) seeking equal treatment under the legislation. However challenging it was/is at times to employ Title IX, it has provided a boost to the number of female athletes participating in educationally based athletics across the country (Harrison and Secarea 2010). In 1971, 294,015 school-age girls participated in high school sports compared to 3,666,917 boys. That figure
grew to 1,858,659 girls compared to 3,398,192 boys during the 1989-1990 academic year (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993).

As these statistics show, Title IX has mainly supported women’s athletics at the high school and collegiate level as these are the programs receiving federal funding. This means that, by definition, Title IX does not support women’s athletics at the professional level and does not contribute to decreasing the wide gap between professional opportunities for men and opportunities for women. Although some positive steps have been made more recently in the area of professional sporting opportunities for women, but lack of popularity and sustainability are still challenges facing women’s professional leagues. While professional leagues have come and gone over the years there has been some success in more recent years.

Four of the major women’s professional leagues in the United States include: the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS) league, Women’s Tennis Association (WTA), and Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). The LPGA is one of the world’s longest standing women’s sporting associations dating back to 1950 with tournaments spanning eleven countries (www.lpga.com). The WTA was created in 1973 and has grown to include 2,400 athletes competing in fifty-three events in thirty-two countries (www.wtatennis.com).

Two of the most popular team sports leagues are the WNBA and WPS. The WNBA is now fifteen years old and currently has twelve teams competing across the United States. The younger WPS began play in 2009 and fielded six teams for the 2011
season (www.womensprosoccer.com). Both leagues have played instrumental roles in the strengthening of their respective United State’s national teams.

Somewhat less popular and well known is the national professional fastpitch softball league for women called National Pro Fastpitch (NPF). The league is a continuation of the Women’s Pro Softball League (WPSL) that folded in 2001 but found new life as the NPF in 2004. With hopes of expansion in 2012 the league currently hosts four teams across the United States and has been the Official Developmental Partner of Major League Baseball since 2005 (www.profastpitch.com).

The focus of this study will be women’s professional football with an emphasis on the Independent Women’s Football League (IWFL). The IWFL was founded in 2000 and currently has thirty-three teams and three additional teams slated for the 2012 expansion season (www.iwflsports.com). However, the IWFL is only one of a number of professional football leagues for women in the United States; other leagues (current and dissolved) include the Women’s Football Alliance (WFA), Women’s Professional Football League (WPFL), National Women’s Football Association (NWFA), Women’s American Football League (WAFL), American Women’s Football League (AWFL), Women’s Football League (WFL), and the Lingerie Football League (LFL).

Currently, the IWFL, WFA, and WAFL are operating with the largest number of teams in each league; the WAFL runs a spring season and the IWFL and WFA play their seasons in the fall. All of the football leagues have been challenged by competition between leagues and there has been a general lack of consensus between the leagues as to how to move American women’s football forward to create sustainability for any league
in the future. Leagues have also been challenged with teams moving from league to league and with the lack of stability for teams as it’s not uncommon for teams to have difficulty keeping their doors open from season to season.

The Lingerie Football League (LFL) includes 12 teams competing in the United States and Canada for the 2011-2012 season. This league is full-contact and based on a 7 verses 7 format much like other indoor football leagues. The LFL was created following the success of the “Lingerie Bowl”; the alternative to the halftime show during the National Football League’s Super Bowl game (www.lflus.com).

While women’s professional football is not currently on par with the professional leagues discussed earlier (such as the WNBA and LPGA) it is important to note that the successful women’s professional leagues of today have faced and continue to face challenges in regards to their legitimacy and sustainability in U.S. society. The information presented on women’s professional leagues provides an important backdrop to the discussion of women’s professional football and the experiences of players as league administrators and players move to bring women’s professional football to the forefront of women’s sports. As will be discussed, the topics of gender, sexuality, and socialization may play a pivotal role in the future of women’s professional sports and, more specifically, women’s professional football.

The study of sport in the United States is important because of its presence in so many communities with peewee leagues to senior leagues. It has moved from not only a source of recreation but also to big business with large profits at stake at both the
collegiate and professional levels. And sport makes its way into countless living rooms across the country through media.

An even more important reason for study of sport is its history as a homosocial arena in which the superiority of men and masculinity is both defined and supported (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993). This arena includes the exclusion of women and weaker men (often homosexual men) and aligns sport with masculinity and heterosexuality. This alignment also leads to the identification of female athletes (especially successful female athletes) as masculine and therefore lesbian. The female athlete faces the challenge of incongruent identities - *female* and *athlete* (Knight and Giuliano 2003; Dworkin and Messner 2002; Lorber 1993; Wughalter 1978). This theme of incongruent identities and the subsequent managing of the identities, as well as assumed sexuality and the feminine apologetic, are important topics in current academic research on sport.

During their athletic careers female athletes are likely to encounter the collision of gender and sexuality with sport. Larger societal demands for the female athlete to maintain her femininity places her in the difficult position of managing the contradictory demands of her given gender and the demands of her sport (most often experienced with team sports). Excelling in sport often requires a more athletic and muscular (masculine) body that is in contradiction to the feminine body demanded by her gender and often leading to the assumption that the athlete is a lesbian.

Female athletes may respond in a variety of ways including emphasizing her femininity both on and off the court through the use of make-up, ribbons, or clothing
which accentuates her figure. The locker room may be used as her staging area after competition for her to morph into her required feminine self off the playing field. She may also downplay her own athletic abilities so as to move herself further away from the masculine traits that assist her sporting excellence. This may all seem as though it is confined to the individual athlete’s experience and therefore meaningless at a general societal level except when it comes to the realization that sport in the U.S. is equated with masculinity. With this in mind, the question then becomes how legitimate can an athlete and her sport be when she is constantly expected to both display and “be” feminine?

Sport continues to be dominated by the male athlete and his experience. In no sport is this more true than with American football. Football, as will be discussed further in chapter two, has been uniquely defined and aligned with masculinity and is almost completely devoid of female participation (apart from cheerleaders). However, this void is gradually changing with the, albeit slow, growth of women’s professional football in the United States.

The study of the female athlete’s experience in this particular sport provides a unique and powerful insight into the underlying social meanings of sport and, in particular, football. Likely due to its relatively short history little research has been conducted on the experiences of female professional football players and this research will focus on gender and sexuality and the players’ experiences with assumed sexuality, managing identities, and the feminine apologetic.

While media is not a main focus of this research it does play a role in the dissemination of information on gender and sexuality as it pertains to sport; it is also part
of the reason why studying professional sports is relevant because of high levels of media coverage for professional sports. There is no doubt that men’s sports receive more media coverage than women’s sports (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988). However, the problem not only lies in the amount of coverage women’s sports receives but, more importantly, in the quality of media coverage received.

Media coverage of women’s sports and female athletes often involves showcasing “positive female characteristics rather than female athletic ability and accomplishment” (Wughalter 1978: 12). By focusing on feminine characteristics and presenting the female athlete as a sexualized object, the female athlete is not viewed as a legitimate athlete and is viewed as being less than her male counterpart: men’s bodies are powerful whereas women’s bodies are sexual (Lorber 1993). In this way, sports media serves to reinforce the existing gender order (Dworkin and Messner 2002; Connell 1987, 1995).

Sports media plays an important part in the legitimation and sustainability of professional sports and in maintaining the role of sport as a social institution:

Much of the continued salience of sport as an institutional site for the construction and legitimation of masculine power lies in its role as mass mediated spectacle (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993: 122).

In short, through media, sport is everywhere and able to reach many more people than just those who are participating in it (Hargreaves 1986; Clarke and Clarke 1982; Willis 1982): “An individual who watches an athletic event constructs and derives various meanings from the activity” (Messner et al., 1993: 132). Media serves as a megaphone for the meanings, definitions, and processes that are at work in sport making the study of
sport all the more important for understanding gender and sexuality at the larger societal level.

This research will focus on female professional football players in the Independent Women’s Football League utilizing interview data gathered between 2003 and 2006. Analysis will focus on players’ experiences with sexuality and sport and how the two intersect. As mentioned earlier, sexuality, specifically assumed sexuality, has the potential to affect society’s view of the athlete and ultimately sport as a legitimate space for women. The present research will attempt to move towards a better understanding of how the experiences of female athletes are shaped by sexuality and gender in their participation in a highly masculinized sport such as football.

Research on sport has been conducted in a variety of subject areas including gender, socialization, injury and pain, labeling, and coaching. A growing segment of research is focusing on the experiences of female athletes and is contributing to a greater and more holistic understanding of sport by providing insight into the experience of the minority participant. The equation of football to masculinity makes this research a unique forum for which to work towards a better understanding of the relationship between sport, gender, and sexuality. This makes this research not only important for the future of women’s professional football but also important for women’s sports in general and to a better overall understanding of gender and sexuality for the larger society through sports and media. A review of existing literature pertinent to this research will be discussed in the next chapter as well as a brief history of sport in the United States.
Literature Review

Sociologists recognize the important role that sport plays in the facilitation and maintenance of gender roles and expectations in the United States. The history of sports in the United States is teeming with examples of masculine verses feminine - from the relegation of women to the sidelines, to women on tennis courts and gymnastics floors, to women on softball fields and basketball courts – like the larger society in which sports exist, women have been consistently defined as inferior to their male counterparts. Sport has aided and abetted in establishing and maintaining this definition (Park 1987).

History of Sport in the United States

Women have long participated in games of play and sport. While women’s participation in sporting activities could surely be dated back several centuries ago this research is more concerned with women’s participation in the modern sports era. Some of the earliest and most popular sports to enter America made their way from Britain in the 1700’s and included tennis, croquet, field hockey (more popular with women than men), crew, track, and golf. Other, and somewhat less popular sports included horseracing, cricket, boxing, and cock fighting. For the most part, sports such as gymnastics and callisthenic exercises likely have German and Scandinavian origins (Park 1987). These early sports would lay the foundation for what sport looks like today but the focus of this paper will be on the modern sports era beginning in the mid-19th century.

Modern sport in the United States was formed in conjunction with the industrial revolution and the move towards capitalism during the 18th and 19th centuries. As the new capitalist society would become characterized by specialization, bureaucratization,
class inequalities, and rules and regulations, sport would evolve as well, bringing with it differing views. While some view sport as a microcosm of the society in which it exists, others view sport as an irrational activity existing within a rationalized society (Crosset 1990). Regardless of the differing views, sport was becoming a major institution of socialization (especially in regards to gender) in the nineteenth century. In both Britain and America sport “came to be forcefully and graphically depicted as the ‘natural’ province of males” and, therefore, defining and maintaining “the proper sphere of women” (Park 1987: 59).

With support from public schools in both England and the United States in the early to mid-19th century, sport would move from a social gathering to an international platform for the use of promoting nationalism and the separation of genders. As sport continued to evolve through the mid-19th century its role in the socialization of men and women would continue to solidify: “Sport served as one of the social institutions…that played a critical role in socializing men to define themselves as biologically superior to women. Sport and athletics as we know it [today] originated during this period” (Crosset 1990: 51).

It was not until the passage of Title IX of the education amendments of 1972 that women’s athletics would receive a boost. Following three years of work, this landmark legislation, signed into law in 1975 by the President, prohibits discrimination against women and girls in federally funded educational programs including athletic programs (Hogan 1979). At the time of its inception and formulation, Title IX advocates had hoped that it would provide strict and rigid guidelines to assist in directing both
opportunity and funding for women’s athletics receiving federal funding. However, Title IX would not live up to this desire as it lacked specific guidelines and only offered vague guidelines in preventing discrimination by any education program receiving federal monies. Instead, Title IX provided for equal opportunity and not necessarily equal funding creating an idea that “it’s yours if you can get it” (Hogan 1979: 175).

Arguably, Title IX has had a positive effect on girls’ participation in sports (Harrison and Secarea 2010; Parsons and Betz 2001). That positive effect can been seen in the dramatic increase in athletic participation of school-age girls from 294,015 in 1971 to 1,858,659 participants during the 1989-1990 academic year (Messner et al. 1993). An even more astonishing figure shows an 874% increase of girls’ participation in high school varsity sports since Title IX’s passage. While Title IX faces scrutiny even today it seems that Title IX has at least supported women’s athletics in terms of increasing opportunities for participation.

**Gender Relations and Sport**

For some scholars, the institution of sport has created a homosocial arena for men to assert their ideology of male superiority during the 20th century. “Through the exclusion of women and the association of males with physical competence, strength, power, and even violence, sport has provided a basis through which men have sought to reconstitute an otherwise challenged masculine hegemony” (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993: 121; Whitson 1990; Hall 1988; Messner 1998; Bryson; 1987; Kidd 1987; Theberge 1981). Sport provides the platform for males to express their manliness through manifesting those qualities claimed as basic including strength, stamina, and
endurance (Watson 1986; Goffman 1977), thereby separating themselves from women and weaker men. Competitive sports have become an important avenue for the assertion and legitimation of violence and aggression, and more importantly masculinity (Lorber 1993).

Based on assumptions of gender and physiological abilities, rules of sport are even modified to accommodate the perceived shortcomings of female athletes. For example, female “gymnastic equipment is geared to slim, wiry, prepubescent girls and not to mature women; conversely, men’s gymnastic equipment is tailored for muscular, mature men, not slim, wiry prepubescent boys” (Lorber 1993: 571). The size of the basketball used for high school, college, and basketball women’s play is smaller than that used in men’s games. The rules of the game of basketball are also modified from the men’s game to encourage “a slower, less intense, and less exciting” (Lorber 1993: 572; Watson, 1987) women’s game. The 1992 Winter Olympic games provide the final example where male figure skaters were required to complete three triple jumps in their program compared to female skaters not being allowed to complete more than one, thereby punishing artistic male skaters and athletic female skaters. These equipment and rule modifications represent and perpetuate gender difference ideologies in sport and off the playing fields (Lorber 1993).

In summary, by playing sports males will learn how to be gender appropriate men by separating themselves from their female counterparts both literally and figuratively. By simultaneously displaying and affirming the traits seen as quintessentially male and differentiating those from traits seen as quintessentially female, sport has played a major
role in the separation of genders and the resulting assignment of power to the male gender.

It is important to also note that women and other non-playing males will learn these lessons in their exclusion and absence from the sporting world. Through their social connections and the mass media non-playing individuals will receive the same messages about gender as their playing counterparts (Lorber 1993). Although this does not mean that women are completely absent from sports, this does mean that they will not receive the same support to participate nor will they receive the same gender role support as males involved in athletic play. Let us move to a discussion on the experiences of women when entering sport.

Women and Sport

As stated earlier, significantly more women are participating in recreational and academically sponsored sports and leagues, including increased sporting opportunities for women at the collegiate level. Although often controversial, Title IX of the education amendments of 1972 has been credited with playing a major part in the dramatic increase of sporting opportunities for women in the twentieth century (Pelak 2002).

Title IX, along with increased sporting opportunity at the youth level for young girls, has participated in providing the foundation for women’s professional sports leagues like the Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA), Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), and the Women’s Professional Football League (WPFL) (Messner 2002). Professional sports will be discussed in more depth later but it is important to note here the positive impact Title IX on women’s athletics.
Messner also points out that while improvements have been made because of Title IX:

the fundamental attitudes and inequities engendered by sporting institutions and by the matrix of social apparatuses with which they are enmeshed (i.e., the U.S. media, corporations, colleges and high schools, local parks and recreation services, etc.” remain rather firmly entrenched (2002: 128).

It would seem that it’s not merely quantity that should be the concern but also quality – in other words, offering an equitable playing field for both men and women is not just about providing the opportunity to play but also about challenging the overarching stereotypes about female athletics and barriers to participation in sport; an important part of this discussion is the experiences of female athletes when they enter the realm of sport.

Women may find fewer social obstacles to participating in individual sports as compared to team sports. Participation in sports such as golf, gymnastics, swimming still “allow women to remain true to the female stereotype: glamorous, graceful, nonsweaty” (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988: 2; Boutilier and SanGiovanni 1983). These sports tend to be more aesthetic in nature and emphasize graceful movement and form (Theberge 1993). Team sports, on the other hand, generally emphasize athletic prowess and require physical contact, the use of force, projecting an athlete’s body through the air. Examples of sports providing opportunities for the display of athletic prowess include soccer, basketball, football, and track and field (Watson 1987). These sports have clearly been
defined as masculine and not appropriate for women as they require displays of strength, power, and physical contact (Theberge 1993; Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Watson 1987).

_Battling Identities_

Once women actually enter the playing field they are often faced with the challenges of managing the incongruent identities that come with being female and an athlete. Being a good female/woman is incongruent with being a good athlete and conversely, being a good athlete means not being a good female/woman; “the simultaneous production of a feminine identity and the relational identity of athlete is characterized by dilemmas and contradictions” (Watson 1987: 435). The female athlete finds herself embroiled in a battle with her given identity from birth (female) and her relational identity earned on the playing field (athlete).

These contradictions are centered around the consistent process of calling into question the athletic abilities and accomplishments, femininity, and even the sexuality of the female athlete while operating with the assumption that the athlete is not a “real” woman and/or she is a lesbian (Knight and Giuliano 2003; Dworkin and Messner 2002; Lorber 1993; Wughalter 1978). Of particular interest to this research is the process of questioning the athlete’s femininity and, ultimately, her sexuality.

As has been presented so far, athleticism in the United States has been equated with masculinity. This means that women participating in sport are often viewed as being masculine, unladylike, or manly (Blinde and Taub 1992; Willis 1982) and are therefore violating gender norms (Blinde and Taub 1992; Schur 1984). What results is
often the linkage of female athletes to lesbianism because they are viewed as masculine and as violating gender norms. She is then labeled “lesbian.”

The lesbian label, representing a violation of sexuality norms (Schur 1984), is based on the idea that women who challenge traditional gender-role behavior cannot be ‘real’ women (Blinde and Taub 1992: 522; Lenskyj 1991).

In essence, the female athlete is confronted by an image problem that is fed by the “underlying fear in society that participating in sports will encourage homosexuality or even convert female athletes into lesbians and prevent them from fulfilling their stereotypical domestic and maternal roles” (Knight and Giuliano 2003: 273; Boutilier and SanGiovanni 1983).

*Managing Incongruent Identities*

In response to her femininity being called into question and to being labeled a lesbian, the female athlete may find a viable solution in presenting a strong display of femininity outside of the playing field.

One study of women college basketball players found that although they ‘did athlete’ on the court – ‘pushing, shoving, fouling, hard running, fast breaks, defense, obscenities and sweat’, they ‘did woman’ off the court (Lorber 1993: 573; Watson 1987).

This response to the negotiation of differing roles is called the feminine apologetic and is most needed by female athletes participating in team sports such as softball, basketball, or football because of increased social barriers to participation as mentioned earlier. The feminine apologetic is a learned behavior and unconscious
reaction that provides a defense against social criticism (Wughalter 1978) and is ultimately the result of the female athlete’s requirement (given by society) to overcompensate for her masculine behavior on the playing field (Knight and Giuliano 2003).

In practice, the feminine apologetic may take place on the court through the practice of maintaining long hair and the use of ribbons, containing anger on the playing field, or wearing tight, constricting apparel that accentuates femininity but hampers athletic performance (Wughalter 1978). It may also manifest itself off the court with the locker room serving as the “staging area” (Lorber 1993). Post game staging often includes showering (removing the sweat of the “athlete”), styling hair, and applying make-up. While the process of “dressing” for the game might take fifteen minutes the process of cleansing oneself of the “athlete” identity could easily take triple the preparation time (Lorber 1993; Watson 1987). Other off the court examples include denigrating one’s own athletic ability

While the feminine apologetic might, on an individual level, assist the female athlete in maintaining a feminine display and managing conflicts regarding her incongruent identities, it simultaneously supports current myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions of the female athlete (Wughalter 1978). “Much cultural energy is…expended to reify female athletes as unequivocally heterosexual, as more suited to motherhood and nurturance ‘off the court,’ and as the categorically inferior athletes” (Dworkin and Messner 2002: 348). It is also important to remember that by emphasizing
her femininity the female athlete is also separating herself from the lesbian label that is
given to her because of masculine behavior on the playing field.

As the female athlete’s identity as “female” is stressed her identity as “athlete” is
diminished and her athleticism is questioned. Because sports have been aligned with
masculinity, the process of accentuating feminine traits and subsequent hiding of
masculine traits diminishes the female athlete’s athleticism (Lorber 1993). This message
has the potential to be shared with the masses.

As media coverage for sports has become more prevalent the feminine apologetic
has affected the kinds of sporting images that have been portrayed. For example,
Dworkin and Messner (2002) found:

that women’s magazines emphasize fitness, beauty, pleasure and participation
in sport, whereas men’s magazines disproportionately feature competitive sports,
power, and performance (350).

Others have found similar patterns where positive feminine characteristics are
emphasized rather than masculine characteristics that would support female athletes’
athleticism: Wughalter (1978), Duncan and Hasbrook (1988), Lorber (1993), and Knight
and Giuliano (2003). Media coverage creates the opportunity for a large number of
people to receive an education on gender roles and sport. Sporting participants and direct
spectators are not the only individuals receiving this education as consumers of
 television, radio, and print media. They are also receiving the information through mass
media and the feminine apologetic.
Football

Educating men (and women) about male dominance and gender socialization extends beyond the football field, unfolding on the hardwood, soccer field, baseball diamond, and in the ring with the demand for chiseled bodies and hardened emotions, however, few sports exemplify this process so much so as American football. Football is a wildly popular sport and its reach extends from big cities to small communities across the country. Opportunities to play football begin early on with youth leagues (American Youth Football and Pop Warner, for example) all the way to professional leagues such as the National Football League (NFL) and Arena Football League (AFL).

“The masculinity-validating dimensions of football ritual have always been one of the game’s prominent cultural features” (Sabo and Panepinto 1990: 115; Kimmel, 1987b; Messner, 1998). The game of football is well known for its physical play and sometimes over-the-top theatrics and showmanship on the field – especially in regards to the National Football League (NFL). Almost every touchdown, sack, or big play is accompanied by some form of celebration that reiterates a sense of accomplishment and even domination over opponents on the field. Football is a rough, full contact sport requiring strong bodies and strong wills to compete and to sustain a career on the professional level. Let’s move the discussion to social processes occurring before a player reaches the professional level.

Some scholars have described football as a “male initiation rite” as it contains the element of “a social theater with an all-male, intergenerational cast” with “an older-coach/young-player relationship” (Sabo and Panepinto 1990: 117). Often, this
relationship will develop over a number of years and while a player may be influenced by different coaches as he gets older, the relationship between coach/mentor and player/mentee remains the same. In this relationship, the coach will teach the mentee what it means to be male and how to fulfill this role both on and off the field. This process will include learning to conform to rules and regulations, social isolation (especially from females and non-competing males), and an introduction to authority and hierarchical systems of power (Sabo and Panepinto 1990).

The exclusion of women from this scene tends to lead to the exaggeration of masculine traits and the simultaneous devaluing of female traits. “Football is a macho game, the ultimate expression of macho in America. You look at yourself as the ultimate physical male and so look at other genders differently” (Sabo and Panepinto 1990: 121). Players learn that to be a man you must be the opposite of a woman leading to male dominance and the inferiorization of women (Sabo and Panepinto 1990; Bryson 1983). “Football is a type of male interaction that perpetuates male privilege through dominance bonding” (Sabo and Panepinto 1990: 125; Farr 1998).

**Professional Sports**

What is of particular concern for this research is professional sports for women in the United States and, in particular, women’s professional football. While increases in participation at the recreational and collegiate level have been made, there is still something to be desired at the professional level for all of women’s sports. Some success has been made in creating and sustaining professional sporting opportunities for women but an irrefutable gap between these opportunities for men and women remains.
Because of the unique characteristics of football discussed just a moment ago and the somewhat recent emergence of women’s professional football, the experiences of female football players provides a poignant area of study in a number of areas including media coverage, gender roles and coaching, pain and injury, and many more. This research will focus on the issues discussed here including identity, gender performance, assumed sexuality, and the feminine apologetic and how these concepts are related to women’s athletics and the experiences of female athletes.
Research Methods

This research utilizes secondary data analysis from thirty-five in-depth, face-to-face interviews gathered over a three-year period between 2003 and 2006. Each interview was recorded via an audio recorder and was later transcribed verbatim. Interview participants include professional female football players, team owners and support staff, and family and friends of players from two Northern California teams. Participants represented a range of races and ethnicities with 19% of respondents identifying as Latina, African American, and Pacific Islander and the majority (81%) of participants identified as white. The education levels of participants ranged from some college to advanced degrees with most reporting full-time employment (71%) and the remaining (29%) reported part-time employment, were enrolled in school, performed labor at home, or were seeking employment at the time of the interview. The median age for respondents was thirty years old and professional football experience included one-third of the respondents having played professional football for four years, one-third for two or three years, and the remaining third were rookies.

During the course of the interview, participants were asked about a number of topics ranging from their athletic histories and how they started playing football, to sexuality, to their ideas on how to sustain women’s professional football leagues in the United States. Interviewers asked open-ended questions and allowed the respondents flexibility by encouraging them to speak about other topics as they came up during the interview. This method allowed the interviewers to obtain a wealth of information about
the respondents that created a well-rounded image of their experiences both on and off
the field.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher was granted access to the transcribed
interviews and agreed to follow all guidelines to ensure protection of the respondents as
originally outlined by the primary researchers. Grounded theory with a feminist
(standpoint) perspective will provide the framework for this analysis as the research is
focused on the newly studied topic of women’s professional football. Feminist
standpoint theory is the most applicable theory to build a framework on as it focuses on
the experiences of women and their experiences of oppression as the inferior group
(Hesse-Biber 2004; Hartstock 1983). In addition, it also allows for an analysis of the
dominant group experience from the perspective of the oppressed. As sport, and
specifically football, is still a predominately male arena standpoint’s focus on the
experiences of the inferior group fits well with the objectives of this study.

Grounded theory’s emphasis on deriving meaning from the participants’
experiences makes it the most appropriate framework for this research. This theoretical
framework supports the process of making meaning from the data and in producing
readable theoretical interpretations from the experiences of participants while also
keeping the researcher close to the participants (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006;
Charmaz 2001). In other words, the researcher recognizes that objectivity is unattainable
and that meaning is constructed in a subjective manner between the participant and
researcher (Mills et al. 2006; Hayes and Oppenheim 1997; Pidgeon and Henwood 1997).
The existing literature on sport, athletics, and gender was used to support the analysis of data but did not overshadow themes and patterns emerging from the data (Babbie 2007).

After completing an initial overview of all the interviews the researcher then coded for topics including “sexuality,” “gender,” “feminine,” and “media”. The researcher then reviewed the coded data to determine any relationships and patterns that existed. By analyzing the experiences of female football players, owners and support staff, and players’ family members, the present research hopes to highlight areas of interest in women’s professional sport and especially women’s professional football. It is also hoped that this research will highlight areas of needed research in gender relations and sports media as it relates specifically to football and full-contact sports.

As the research has suggested, positive moves have been made in regards to media coverage for women’s sports in terms of basketball, soccer, and tennis but this could be expanded to other sports as well. While this research will focus on issues of gender and sexuality, more importantly, it is hoped that this research will demonstrate the need for further research in the area of professional sports for women.
Data Analysis

“We’re women, can we play football?”

Existing literature points to the complex issues facing today’s female athletes. Not only are female athletes challenged by constant comparisons to male athletes, they are also consistently faced with an assumed homosexuality. This can be intensified for female athletes perceived to have more physical and athletic abilities than their fellow female athletes because their athletic prowess has aligned them with masculine traits that promote athletic success.

One of the cultural practices most significant in the construction of gender is sport. For men, sport has historically been a setting for the development and display of traits and abilities that signify masculine power and authority (Crossett 1990; Kimmel 1990). At the same time, women’s exclusion from sport or their admission on a restricted basis has been one way in which the myth of female frailty has been realized (Theberge 1993: 301).

Masculinity has been defined by the possession of traits associated with power, strength, and even violence and aggression and, conversely, femininity has been defined by the possession of traits including frailty, beauty, and non-violence and non-aggression (Blinde and Taub 1992; Schur 1984; Willis 1982). Sport has historically provided a platform for the representation and affirmation of both masculine and feminine traits by providing activities that display these traits. For example, football provides the opportunity to display aggressiveness, strength, and power (masculine), while women’s gymnastics stresses beauty, graceful movement, and non-violence.
This has shaped opportunities for women’s participation in sport and influenced the perspectives on women who do participate. When female athletes break from their appropriate gender norm the result is a linkage with lesbianism (assumed sexuality) as they become aligned with traits and characteristics that are considered masculine. The female athlete is confronted with the challenges of battling identities; her identity as a female is not congruent with athlete (Watson 1987). How will female athletes respond to an assumed sexuality and her battling identities? One response the female athlete may have is to embrace the feminine apologetic.

Through the general objectification of women, the feminine apologetic is utilized as a means of stressing the feminine qualities and characteristics of the female athlete. This may be done on the playing field and/or off the playing field and implies that the female athlete separate herself from the sport on some level. Meaning, that the female athlete can not be both at the same time (female and athlete) and that she must be objectified (knowingly or not) to accentuate that which makes her female. The female athlete may wear make-up, ribbons, or constricting clothing while on the field to emphasize femininity. Following play, she may find herself quickly washing the sweat of competition off and then dressing in ways that again accentuate her femininity.

Respondents in this study shared that their sporting opportunities and their experiences as athletes have been shaped by gender expectations. This is not to say that all female athletes will have the same experiences as the respondents in this study but some common themes in this data do support the idea of sport as a homosocial arena,
assumed sexuality, and the feminine apologetic; the focus of this chapter will be on these identified themes.

**Gender Roles**

This theme was an important one to many of the players and manifested itself in different ways. For some respondents, traditional gender roles factored in to their opportunities to play sports as young girls and/or women; meaning that they were not allowed to play particular sports or any sport because of their gender. For other respondents, gender roles intersected with football in particular in that they weren’t allowed to play football or were ridiculed for playing because of their gender. Generally speaking, girls and women will experience less support for their participation in sport and will receive more support for their participation in individual sports such as tennis, gymnastics, and golf for their perceived “more feminine” qualities (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988: 2; Boutilier and SanGiovanni 1983).

*Sport is no place for women, especially football:*

For some of the players interviewed the idea that sports are not a place for women was prevalent. These were messages that were often provided by family members and close friends and were supported by players’ support systems and their larger social networks. Respondents reported that their sporting opportunities have been shaped by the belief that sport is no place for women; they received support for watching and cheering but less approval for participating. This includes not being allowed to play sports at all: Keri shared that she was not allowed to play sports as a child because her parents believed that “girls didn’t play sports, it was because I was a girl.” She went on
to share that she was almost allowed to play tennis but her parents were worried that she would injure her fingers affecting her ability to play piano.

Others shared that their participation in a particular sport (football in this case) was shaped by their gender when they were kids. Andrea shared that as a young woman “…I always wanted to play [football] but it was just never a possibility and I always thought that basketball was something that I would play because they let women play that.” The perception that women should not play football can even disrupt relationships. Becca reported that she and her mom often argued over Becca wanting to play football as a child because her mom felt that she “shouldn’t be playing with boys.” Becca shared, “Well I always wanted to play football but it was a big fight with my mom that I was never going to win.”

In the examples above, respondents shared experiences about their sporting opportunities (football and non-football opportunities) as children/young women and how those experiences had been shaped by their parents. For Keri, this message has carried over into her adult life. As stated above, she shared that she was not allowed to play any sport as a young child and although she is now an adult and has a family of her own, she shares that she has no intention of telling her mother that she is currently playing football. While Keri has obviously not allowed her mother’s beliefs of gender to shape her sporting opportunities as an adult, Keri has made a conscious decision to limit the possibility for negative feedback regarding her participation in sport.

Other comments shared were in reference to experiences respondents had as adults. This included Alice sharing this comment made by a friend: “That’s not a
woman’s place. You should be home with the kids.” This comment was made in reference to Alice’s continued desire to take a football film class at a local college despite the multiple obstacles she faced from faculty and school administration.

A large segment of Alice’s interview was shaped by the negative experience she and a teammate had at the college. Their attempt to participate in an Offensive Football Laboratory class (football film class) was met with much negative feedback from the teacher/football coach because women “can’t take this class!” When Alice contacted the school administration for support she was met with this from a school dean:

…they’re just going to talk about the games, and how to adjust for upcoming teams, just boring things like that, you guys don’t want to take this class. I have a nice volleyball class, do you guys want to come take that?

Ultimately, the class was moved into the men’s locker room and Alice finished the semester sitting outside the locker room each class waiting for it to end and received a credit/no credit for the class. While this may be an extreme example, it is an excellent illustration of the effect of gender roles on sport and football, in particular how expectations limit access for women.

Another powerful comment from a respondent demonstrates the alignment of the female gender with frailty: “So she just thinks that um I won’t be able to have any children after I’m done playing football.” This quote comes from Dani’s interview and references her grandmother’s thoughts on Dani’s playing football and the thought that the female body isn’t physiologically capable of playing football without dire consequences.
In this case, the consequence is Dani’s perceived inability to bear children, a common belief in society (Lorber 1993), which is a gender appropriate use of her body.

The discussion of assumed sexuality that follows will bring to light the intersection of gender and sexuality as it relates to sports. It is important to understand, at this point, that gender roles played and continue to play an important role in the sporting experiences of many of the respondents.

**Assumed sexuality**

The alignment of sport with masculinity pushes women (and weaker men) to the sidelines or to face the ridicule that comes with women displaying characteristics defined as “masculine” on the playing field. As the literature points out, women who participate in and excel in sports frequently lends itself to an assumed homosexuality where the female athlete is labeled as homosexual (Knight and Giuliano 2003; Dworkin and Messner 2002; Lorber 1993; Wughalter 1978). Many of the players interviewed were also very aware and cognizant of the assumed sexuality placed on them by those outside of their sport. As Kristen identified, “…there is a lot of stereotyping that goes on in women’s sports.” Keri explained more explicitly, “there’s a tendency for people to think that lesbians play more sports.” The concern is not that there are stereotypes but rather that the perceptions impact the attitudes about those who play, focusing discussions on women’s sexuality in sport and not on the accomplishments of the athletes.

Candice shared her distaste with being “questioned about [her] sexuality because it, it puts a stamp on thinking that all women in sports are, you know, you’re a lesbian or you’re gay and you’re bisexual.” By linking female athletes to the queer community, it
limits the power of these women and the impact they can have as well as perpetuates a belief that sport is a reflection of masculinity, and lesbians are nothing more than women who are like men. Consistently throughout the interviews, respondents were very clear in sharing that they experience the alignment of their role as an athlete with masculinity and the subsequent stereotyping of them as homosexual.

The emphasis on sport as a masculine domain is especially relevant to football, becoming an even greater issue as more women begin playing the game. Several players shared that their experiences of being labeled homosexual were in specific reference to their football play. These comments were generally tied to women’s inability to play such a complex sport, a woman’s body isn’t built to play such a sport, or identifying football as a manly sport and therefore a sport for lesbians.

According to Alice, people often “think that just because it’s more of a manly sport that everyone is gay.” Specifically, Alice’s dad had a discussion with her when she first started to play football in which he said he didn’t want her to become a lesbian because she played football. Her mom also told Alice “oh, my god, you’re going butch, you’re turning gay!” when she found out her daughter was playing football. This sentiment was supported by other respondents, including Andrea: “I think people are surprised when you tell them that you’re about 50 percent straight on the team” because they think everyone is homosexual. Lisa also shared that someone once commented to her that “sad, ugly dykes” are the only ones who play football. When asked if there’s an assumption that playing football wouldn’t be feminine, she responded, “Yeah. I think that’s definitely the assumption.” Keri, further elaborated on the assumption:
maybe there’s a tendency for people to think that lesbians play more sports, but I don’t understand why. You can be as feminine as all get out and be just as tough as any lesbian, because sports are made for men, or were designed for men, and it’s just really…football is full-contact, very tough sport, that doesn’t mean that you have to be a lesbian to play it.

Keri’s response shows the transcendence of assumed sexuality from sport in general to football in particular and she also hints at an assumption that all lesbians are tough, showing that even as a player, she was influenced by the stereotype about lesbians and athletics.

One of Emily’s comments about her heterosexual teammates is of particular interest because both on the field play and off the field dress are used to support an assumed sexuality:

…they had long hair but they dressed in boys clothes [off the field], they were always labeled and they were like no, this is just who I am and how I look and I play football so they are going to put all the pieces together and say yes, you’re lesbian.

Much of the commentary shared so far has been about experiences and to some level about respondents’ feelings about those experiences. However, Dani explicitly shares about her personal response to her experiences with the assumed sexuality that goes with her playing football: “The only thing I don’t like though – is when they automatically assume that you’re gay – when you’re not…” This was Dani’s response to the question of whether or not she is hesitant to share with people the fact that she plays
football. Dani goes on to voice her support for the use of media that specifically displays the femininity of athletes because of the perception that all athletes are gay. This will be discussed in further depth later on in the chapter but it is important here as it shows the emotional and personal response of an athlete facing an assumed sexuality.

Other respondents reported a hesitancy to share that they played football with certain people. This included withholding information from family, friends, co-workers, and strangers. For example, in response to whether or not she has ever withheld the fact that she plays football from someone because of fear of rejection Gina shares:

[I] do believe I have done that before…I don’t mention it because I notice parents are like really good church going people and when people notice that I am a football player they think she is a jock, stereotypes and I don’t want to be stereotyped….

A small number of players reported that football (and perceived homosexuality) had caused difficulties in their relationships with their boyfriends. One story in particular stands out. After Emily’s long hair was pulled as a means of tackling her during a game she decided to cut her hair off to make playing football more comfortable. Emily shared that after her hair was cut her “boyfriend started getting really kind of standoffish” and she began to feel “really unattractive and really uncomfortable.” At one point, Emily reported that her boyfriend wouldn’t kiss her outside his apartment one evening following practice because she was in her sweats and he didn’t want anyone to think he was “kissing a dude.” According to Emily, she and her boyfriend eventually broke up in large
part due to his discomfort regarding her new look and because she continued to play football.

Emily was not able to live up to the expectations of her heterosexuality and ultimately lost a significant relationship because of it. The heteronormative expectations of her sexuality require that she wear long hair even when that hair may cause challenges or personal discomfort; in Emily’s case she cut her hair because it caused less pain in her new role as “football player.” Emily’s boyfriend was only able to maintain a relationship with her while playing football as long as she continued to maintain a feminine appearance off the field and once the appearance was questionable the relationship was threatened.

**Feminine Apologetic**

A prominent theme from the interviews was the feminine apologetic. This theme came about as it related to the respondents’ experiences of traditional gender roles and an assumed sexuality while playing football – “the ultimate expression of macho in America” (Sabo and Panepinto 1990: 121). As discussed in chapter two, the feminine apologetic is the learned and unconscious response of the athlete in defense against social criticism (Wughalter 1978) as she is fulfilling her requirement (given by society) to overcompensate for her masculine behavior on the field (Knight and Giuliano 2003). It is a response of the female athlete to her two battling identities of *female* and *athlete*; being a good female/woman is incongruent with being a good athlete and conversely, being a good athlete means not being a good female/woman (Watson 1987: 435).
Respondents in this study shared experiences that are in line with the feminine apologetic including the need to wear make-up during practices and games, wanting long hair despite pain, and the use of the locker room as a staging area to wipe away the sweat of play and to put on the gender appropriate clothing to create or accentuate the presentation of heterosexuality.

Meryl and Alice shared the importance of maintaining a feminine appearance on the field through the use of such items as nail polish and make-up. Meryl shared that she wants to write a book of the “101 things you’ll never hear in the men’s locker room” which will include phrases like “does this nail color clash with my uniform” and “I can’t wait for the season to be over so I can get my nails done.” She also went on to say that following a team picture the only items left in the locker room were two cans of hairspray. Here Meryl points out the emphasis that is placed on beauty by the players through the use of hairspray for a team picture; the irony here lies in the fact that football play requires that players wear helmets on the field, which hides the hair they have taken time and effort to form.

For Alice’s teammates, the use of make-up was seen as a primary function of football play; so much so that it would sometimes delay the actual football activity. Although Alice didn’t elaborate as to what the “work” is, she did share that “from the straight girls’ perspective that they feel like they have to work to prove that they’re straight to prove to other people that they’re straight [and] that they’re not gay.” Alice also shared that one of her teammates would sometimes be late to practice or games
because she would be putting make-up on and would then often ask Alice “is my make-up still on” while on the field.

Alice’s comment succinctly captures the quintessential nature of the feminine apologetic. In the beginning of this excerpt Alice shares that “work” is required of straight players to prove that they are, in fact, straight and not gay as assumed by others. While Alice does not go into detail about the work that is required her next sentence conveys the value of femininity for the straight players. Maintaining femininity is so important to her teammate that she will even be late to practice in order to put on make-up to support her heterosexuality - practice being the very activity thought to improve her abilities as football player and as an athlete.

Lois’ comment focuses on the off the field appearances of teammates as a response to gender role expectations and assumed sexuality. Lois shares about two of her teammates:

…they’re good looking women, but they’re rough at the same time, and then they go put their make-up on and skirts, and they’re you know, different [people]…they do it after the games. You know, after they have their football uniform, you know, they go and they put on nice clothes, and you wouldn’t even tell, that ‘she’s a football player?

Several respondents were well aware of the demands placed on female athletes to display and accentuate their femininity. In line with Wughalter’s (1978) and Lorber’s (1993) research, Alice and Meryl shared the importance of displaying femininity on the field (make-up, fingernail polish, and long hair) while Lois described the use of the
locker room to wash away the sweat of the athlete in preparation to put on “nice clothes” so you can’t “even tell that she’s a football player.” In this way, Lois describes two distinct identities that are incongruent with each other.

Media Images

The relationship of media and sport has been documented in academic literature including the importance of media to sport. Altheide and Snow (1979) discussed the relationship of television and sport in the economic sense as far back as the 1970’s when professional sports first began to vie for national television coverage and the likes of commentators such as Howard Cosell began to play a powerful role in the sporting world. Here, “television’s marriage to sports” (Altheide and Snow: 66) and that this could mean big money for some participants is illustrated.

The power of media to support hegemonic masculinity and the subsequent denial of power to women has also been discussed. Duncan and Hasbrook’s 1988 study of televised women’s sports points out “the disproportionate amount of television coverage devoted to team sports, particularly men’s team sports” (1) and the continued emphasis on sports which reflect qualities true to the “female stereotype” (2). Their discussion of power and sport centers on the idea that “team sports allow athletes to directly exercise their power [and] to see the immediate, direct consequences of that power” during the course of the game. As women are often denied or encouraged away from team sports and are also denied access to women’s team sports via the media, women are denied the opportunity to possess and wield the same power as male athletes.
“Much of the continued salience of sport as an institutional site for the
construction and legitimation of masculine power lies in its role as mass mediated
spectacle” (Messer et al. 1993; Clarke and Clarke 1982; Hargreaves 1986; Willis 1982).
According to Messner et al., this is achieved through the disproportionate representation
of women’s team sports and female athletes from mass media. When representation is
found, images are more likely to emphasize the feminine qualities and heterosexuality of
the athlete rather than the athletic abilities of the athlete (Kane 2011; Knight and Giuliano
heterosexual, feminine women first and as athletes second” (Knight and Giuliano 2003:
274).

Respondents also shared their thoughts and feelings on a larger level about media
materials that were used as advertising for one of the team’s upcoming seasons. As a
brief background of the media, posters and a calendar were created using pictures of the
actual players but rather than the players being in pads and uniforms like previous media
materials, the players were not dressed in their jerseys and were often pictured in
seductive and alluring poses. For example, a number of players were photographed in
tight shirts or with no bra on and at camera angles meant to capture this sentiment
without being overt. Other players were dressed in attire to reflect “sexual fantasies”
such as a “teacher” or “school girl.” These images represented a drastic shift from
previous promotional materials that had accentuated the football playing abilities of the
players.
Some respondents expressed approval for the display of “beauty” and femininity in the media materials. These respondents shared the hope that these images would lead to increased approval from the general public for women’s football and would help to ensure that future generations of women would also have the same opportunities to play football. For these respondents, gaining approval meant bringing in more spectators and supporters to the game of football. For example, Candice shared that some of the pictures were “…a little risqué, but at the same time, you know sometimes its kind of good publicity you know to show that there is beauty in all sports.”

Other comments centered on sexuality specifically and expressed approval for presenting images that dissuade the public from assuming the players’ sexualities. In response to an ad in Sacramento Magazine, Keri shared that she thought the intent of the article was to:

- show people that, probably the initial perception [assumed lesbianism] that people have is not necessarily true, and so in that way, it’s ‘good’ because it shows that there is another side too. It’s not just a whole bunch of really butch women out there playing.

Keri shared this when asked if the images should be used:

- Why not!? Doesn’t bother me. You know, what I think…a few people’s initial response, I said I’m playing women’s football, and they said ‘you’re not a lesbian though?’ And it’s like, you know just because you love sports, and you’re tough, and you want to go out there and do something doesn’t mean that you have to be a lesbian.
Some respondents, like Lois, took sexuality even a step further by referencing the phrase “sex sells” and shared Andrea’s sentiment of “whatever you need to do to make people interested in the sport.” Another respondent also went on to say “so what if some people come to games because of pretty faces” because once they see the game in person maybe they’ll like it and come back. As a marketing strategy, “sex sells,” arguably promotes female athletes and women’s sports as being highly competitive while also maintaining that female athletes can be traditionally feminine and heterosexual (Kane 2011). In fact, this line of thought utilizes the femininity of female athletes to get the public (heterosexual men) to the games so that they can be “won over” by the athletic prowess of the players. Lois and Andrea, among other respondents, share this sentiment for the future of women’s football.

Dani brings together femininity and sexuality when she is asked to share her thoughts about a recent local television commercial which highlights a particular player. This featured player is known for having more “feminine” qualities and Dani even refers to her as “the model” during the interview. Dani had this to share:

I’m glad that they’re putting her out there. You know because people do think that about sports, and it’s not just football – I mean WNBA – I mean the LPGS – they say Lesbian Professional Golf Association, instead of ladies they say lesbians and stuff like that. And I’m glad that they’re kind of making it more feminine and stuff cause that’s what everybody thought.

Dani succinctly demonstrates (unknowingly) the feminine apologetic when she brings together femininity and sexuality in the hopes of conveying the message to the
general public that not all female athletes are lesbians. Her approval of the media images centers on a desire to portray an image of female football players that show they can be beautiful, feminine, and *not* lesbian.

There were some respondents who had mixed feelings about the images, referencing also the idea of “sex sells.” Comments along this line acknowledges the idea that emphasizing heteronormative distinguishers of beauty is important for helping to draw in other potential fans, but the respondents also consider the idea that feminine images make the players look “wimpy” or that the league/team/sport is more about “sex than football.” Although Julie ultimately shared her approval for doing “whatever we can do to get our name out there” she also acknowledged this:

…it’s definitely taking a different approach to promoting our team, you know…maybe for the guys that say…you know…women can’t play football, it might give mixed feelings. On the one hand they look at it, and they say give me a break like those girls could play football, but then again maybe there’d be guys that go ‘oooh those girls look cute, I wanna go out and watch them play football.’ So kind of mixed feelings.

Kristen had this to share:

I have mixed feelings about it. It’s like one of those things like, god what else are we going to do. They always want to take pictures of the beautiful ones, you’re never going to see a lineman in that kind of poster or picture….In some respects I think it’s good…to show that you can have really beautiful women
playing a contact sport like football. You know they’re not all big, ugly butch women.

Julie and Kristen both acknowledge the appeal of the media images to the public (especially heterosexual men) and that the use of these images may serve as an avenue to gain more acceptance of women’s football. Both respondents also share that they are not completely comfortable with the images. Kristen even asks “what else are we going to do” and Julie clearly states that the images might give “guys…mixed feelings.”

Respondents here are questioning the value of placing such emphasis on the femininity and heterosexuality of these football players.

Another segment of respondents shared outright disapproval for the images. Gina expressed her desire for less overt media images that didn’t focus on the players as “women” who happen to be “playing football” and believed that “they should actually have our regular jerseys you know our actual colors, colors of our jerseys and you know us playing football.” Along the same line, Serina poignantly shared “that we’re not out there to prove that we’re women. We’re out there to prove that we’re football players period.”

Disapproval for the images was also shared regarding the topic of sexualizing the players. Alice had been discussing the images with her mother who thought they were positive images “because they’re trying to attract straight women to come play” but Alice shared that she didn’t “think that’s what it’s for.” Alice’s critique of the images focuses on the idea that the media images have moved beyond emphasizing the femininity and heterosexuality of the players and are now objectifying the players.
Perhaps the most poignant disapproval comes from Emily when she shared that she “reject[s] that completely” because when you have players in just their jerseys and sports bras “they are going to be sexualized and will also not be taken seriously.” She goes on to share: “you look in an ad and you see these women, pretty much sexualizing the sport, and it is crushing because that is not what it is about.”

Emily’s response captures the sentiment that accentuating the femininity and subsequent heterosexuality of players carries with it the potential to undermine the athletic abilities of the players and the overall validity of the sport. Emily also goes on to describe the personal side of the story when she shares that “being a female and being tagged sex objects, is just to me so negative and I hate it so much.” For Emily, there is “no happy medium” for female athletes as they are either sexualized or labeled homosexual.

While there were a few, such as Emily, who rejected the use of the media materials to sexualize the players, they were in the minority. Most respondents voiced their support for the images. However, they do not support it blindly. They also conveyed an understanding that the images are supporting the objectification of women but they accept the use of these images to gain more social support for women’s football. In addition, they favor something that sexualizes them and calls into question their athletic prowess so that they can display to the public that they are not all homosexuals. This is the feminine apologetic.
Interpretation and Moving Forward

The information presented in the previous chapter and the premise of this research has been to understand the experiences of a group of individuals participating in women’s professional football. While care must be taken not to take the findings of this research and apply it to ALL female athletes and ALL sports, the information gathered here does present a unique starting point on which future research can build. This research does not support the premise that all female athletes will share in the experiences presented here but it does show some shared experiences that are important to the sociological study of sport.

While the themes of gender, assumed sexuality (lesbianism), and the feminine apologetic were discussed separately in chapter four it is important to note that all three do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion. In a sense, they are interdependent of each other and each one supports the other. These themes can be viewed more appropriately as existing on a circular path revolving around the female athlete in the middle.

As demonstrated by the experiences shared in chapter four, the cyclical relationship of these three themes is evident when observing that participants’ deviation from traditional gender roles and expectations leads to an assumed sexuality (lesbian) being placed on the players. The feminine apologetic is then used, consciously or unconsciously, as a means of managing the incongruent identities of the female athletes. The apologetic is a performance of appropriate assigned gender roles, which denigrates the female player to an object of desire and not as accomplished athletes. It is here that
sport can be seen as encouraging and supporting the larger heteronormative society in which it exists.

“Girls don’t play sports”

Sport continues to be an activity dominated by the male experience. As a review of the literature has shown, sport has served as a homosocial arena in which the superiority of men and masculinity is both defined and supported (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993) and the subsequent exclusion of women and weaker men from play reinforces the ideology of male heterosexual dominance.

Almost all of the respondents reported that their sporting opportunities have been shaped by their assigned gender (female) and the general societal norm that femininity does not mix with sports. As discussed in Chapter Four, this message was conveyed to respondents both directly and indirectly. Some respondents reported directly receiving the message that “girls don’t play sports” while others received it indirectly through lack of encouragement to participate in sports or encouragement to play “female appropriate” sports. The results of this messaging ranged from no participation in any sport to participation in female appropriate sports (tennis or cheerleading, for example). Even as adults (with families of their own), some respondents reported continued challenges and lack of support for their football play from close friends and family.

This raises concern over the slow progression and continued deficiency in sporting opportunities provided to women of all ages. Obviously, great strides have been made since the passage of Title IX of the education amendments of 1972 but the experiences shared in this research point out that there is still room to grow. As
referenced above, gender roles and expectations continue to limit the sporting opportunities provided to women as evidenced by these athlete’s stories. This calls into question the failure of society to fully support women’s involvement in team sports and the equitable distribution of the benefits that go along with participation.

By limiting women’s access to sporting opportunities they are being denied the same learning and social experiences as male athletes such as cooperation and negotiation skills and a sense of camaraderie and teamwork not available in the individual sports deemed female appropriate (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988). Women athletes are also systematically denied access to the direct and immediate display of power (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988) and a general sense of accomplishment that comes with participation in team sports (Theberge 1993). These limitations also mean that women are not able to access the economic (monetary) rewards associated with team sports – especially professional sports. It is possible that these continued limitations on sporting opportunities for women could potentially drive female athletes to stop competing altogether.

For those women who persist in playing, such as the respondents in this study, failure to adhere to traditional gender roles and expectations through their sport, and football specifically, led to a frequent labeling of these respondents as lesbian – a source of frustration for several respondents. This supported academic literature where labeling is most often seen with women who participate in sports requiring the display of masculine defined characteristics; most often these are team sports requiring the display of strength, power, and physical contact (Theberge 1993; Duncan and Hasbrook 1988;
Watson 1987). Football is, of course, a game requiring much strength and physical contact and is considered to be “the ultimate expression of macho in America” (Sabo and Panepinto 1990: 121). It is not surprising then that these respondents were labeled lesbian as the game of football represents a stark contrast from what is defined as female appropriate behavior.

**Close to Home**

The concern of family members and friends that the female athlete would become “gay” or “lesbian” because of their football play is a good representation of the pressure to adhere to appropriate gender representations and the labeling that occurs when female athletes deviate. It also introduces another issue of concern for a few of the respondents: the loss of or the worry of losing significant relationships because of their football play. For a small segment of the respondents the loss of a significant relationship was already a reality for them and the experience of having “negative” conversations with family and close friends was a source of personal pain.

These experiences in particular hint at the potential emotional and psychological tolls shared by female athletes. Constant concern over the potential loss of significant relationships would likely cause much personal discomfort. Considering this, it would not be unbelievable to think that the female athlete would forego her participation in sports in favor of alleviating this discomfort. As recounted by several of the respondents, they were consistently faced with the decision of who to tell about their football playing experience and if they did tell someone how much would they tell? Respondents were clear that they were aware of their “audience” in conversations and this would often
dictate the kind of information that they would share in the attempt to avoid negative responses. Essentially, as with the LGBT community, these women had to choose to whom they “came out” to as football players. Still, despite many challenges, many respondents desired to do so to educate others about women’s football.

Female or Athlete?

The desire to dissuade public assumption about women’s athletics and women’s football is nothing new to the experiences of female athletes. Literature has long documented the experience of battling identities – female and athlete – and the responses female athletes pursue in the attempt to manage these incongruent identities, such as the feminine apologetic (Lorber 1993; Watson 1987; Wughalter 1978). Participants in this study shared their unknowing contribution in the feminine apologetic through involvement in activities accentuating their femininity and, by proxy, their heterosexuality.

While participants did share information about particular activities that players would take part in - make-up, long hair, painted nails - it was the topic of media images that brought out much of the discussion on the feminine apologetic. Respondents provided feedback on the media images that ranged from enthusiastic approval to frustrated disapproval with approval of the images centering on the desire to dissuade public opinion of women’s football. All of the women in this study, however, were aware of the intent of such portrayals (accentuating the femininity of players), as many female athletes consistently articulate. Sexualizing themselves and their teammates in the media may imply an increased viewership, as can be noted by the television coverage of
the “Lingerie Football League;” but it simultaneously perpetuates the objectification of
women and maintains the denigration of women by placing women’s skills secondary to
their looks. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of the male gaze to attain
legitimacy, therefore limiting any impact women in football can have on the general
perspective about women.

Their desire to further the acceptance of women’s athletics and professional
football is undermined by the objectification through the media materials and posits the
male gender as the determinant of legitimacy. As academic literature has pointed out,
employing the feminine apologetic supports common myths and stereotypes about female
athletes and calls her athleticism into question (Dworkin and Messner 2002; Wughalter
1978). Unlike her male counterparts, the female athlete can not be both female and
athlete at the same time and the emphasis of one role leads to the de-emphasis of the
other role (Lorber 1993).

This has serious consequences for not only the future of women’s professional
football but also for the future of women’s sports. The importance of media to sport has
been documented as far back at 1979 (Altheide and Snow 1979) and media continues to
bring sports and all of its underlying messages and meanings to the masses (Knight and
Giuliano 2003; Hargreaves 1986; Clarke and Clarke 1982; Willis 1982). Considering the
economic relationship between media and sport it seems unlikely that the two will be
separated anytime soon which heightens the concern that scholars have had for years on
the impact of media on women’s athletics.
The practice of media to highlight female athletes as *female* rather than *athlete* throws women’s athletics and the female athlete into the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” With the common belief that using sex to sell women’s athletics brings more public support to the game running rampant, it is scary to think of what will actually happen to the future of women’s athletics if we are unable to come to an agreement that a woman may be both a *female* and an *athlete* at the same time – the elusive female athlete. Public support for women’s sport may reach a point of stagnancy or the female athlete may become so disenfranchised with the constant process of defending her incongruent identities that she hangs up her cleats for good.

While all of the experiences shared here in this research are individual experiences, their experiences demonstrate that sport is a microcosm of the larger society (Crosset 1990); sport serves as a reinforcer of the larger society’s gender roles. What is interesting about the experiences of these participants in particular is that they are participating in a sport that is defined as ultra masculine (a deviation from female gender expectations) and at the same time traditional gender roles are still being supported through the feminine apologetic.

Here we can revisit the idea presented at the beginning of this chapter that gender, assumed sexuality, and the feminine apologetic do not occur in a linear fashion. Rather, these three separate themes support one other and help to move from one theme to the next as in a circular path. What is more disconcerting is that the interconnection of the issues hampers women’s pursuit of sport, while simultaneously perpetuating the
hegemonic standard of gender in sport, and society in general. From this point, where does society move to truly (and equally) move women’s athletics forward?

**Moving Forward**

This research represents a starting point for future research and has opened up avenues of thought to explore, but there are limitations. To begin, the data analyzed is secondary data – the researcher was not involved in the interview process. While this may allow for some new perspectives to be found, it also means that this researcher might have missed important points or topics that came up during the interview process that could have been probed in greater depth. Furthermore, the focus of the original interviewers was not solely on the relationship between gender and sexuality, so opportunities to expand on these topics during the interview could have been missed. The relevance of these topics to the respondents during interviews demonstrates the need to conduct future research focusing specifically on these issues allowing for in-depth conversations on gender, sexuality, and sport.

The sample population for this research included players and personnel associated with women’s professional football teams in a generally socially progressive geographic location. Future research could benefit by seeking to connect with respondents from other less-progressive geographic locations to gain a better understanding of the experiences of those respondents. Understandably, this may be difficult considering that women’s professional football exists outside of traditional gender roles and may experience increased difficulties in surviving in less progressive locations.
The interviews presented here were conducted between 2003 and 2006 and while this time period is relatively recent it would be interesting to conduct interviews again for comparison. On the political front, issues of sexuality and gender are on the forefront with debates on gay marriage, the repeal of the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” ban, and female soldiers on the frontlines. Considering the point made earlier about sport as a microcosm of the larger society and in turn supporting a heteronormative society, it would be of interest to complete interviews of this kind again to determine differences, if any.

The movement of sport from a recreational activity to an organized enterprise has meant the creation of a multi-million dollar business model creating profits for a number of industries like athletic shoes, supplements, and sports drinks. This research points to the need for continued study of sport as women continue to experience limited access to not just the same sporting opportunities but also to the same economic and social benefits as their male counterparts.
References


