

## **PLAYING THE 'MASCULINE/FEMININE' GAME**

**'So he plays harder...and she plays softer'**

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### **Sport and Gender**

The feminist critique of sport as a masculine domain has given birth to studies which highlight the marginalisation and trivialisation of women's sport, in the past and in the present. More recently, feminist theory has begun to address the very categories at the structural base of 'women', 'exclusion' and 'control' (Birrell and Cole, 1994). In understanding gender as a process rather than as a thing that people have, we can see that gender is "an historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of masculinity and femininity" (Connell in Messner and Sabo, 1990: 11-12). It is constructed over time, changes with culture and incorporates a spectrum from the 'hyper' masculine to the 'hyper' feminine ('hyper' denoting what is regarded as the extreme end of the spectrum).

Various societies (at different times) have viewed sex and gender in very different ways. Mondimore (1996) traces the history of homosexuality since the earliest times and points out that we need to understand how ancient cultures viewed sex and sexual activity before we can begin to understand modern conceptions of sexuality. He shows that "the word *homosexuality* did not exist prior to 1869, when it appeared in a pamphlet that took the form of an open letter to the German minister of justice" (1996: 3). His examination of ancient Greek society reveals that sexuality and procreation were not linked in same way as they are today. Sexual pleasure was

available, for men at least, in a variety of forms outside marriage as well. Similarly, Shibley Hyde and DeLamater (1997) highlight the impact of religion and science on perspectives of sexuality as a whole e.g. varying beliefs regarding sex before marriage, the 'un-naturalness' of homosexuality and, contraception.

Gender is a social construction and has therefore varied over time and changed with culture. Masculinity and femininity (which are gender constructs) exist on a related continuum and, in modern times, sport operates to police the very strict boundaries between these two, pushing definitions to relative polar opposites.

Sport can also highlight and challenge the polarisation of the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. In particular, it is the sports persons themselves who can challenge the perceptions of gender, masculinity and femininity. In a similar vein to Inglis (1997: 17), I agree that we must "develop a sociology of Irish sexuality which describes and analyses the way sexuality was seen, understood and embodied by participants in Irish social life". This paper, as an introduction to my research, will illuminate some issues in the international and Irish sporting arena, in particular how it intertwines with sexuality and gender in everyday life. Inglis argues that "the habitus and practice of sexuality...is a social interactive process, as a form of accumulated power (or capital) it links into the struggle by actors to accumulate other forms of capital" (1997: 7). Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (1972: 155). In other words it is a process of socialisation whereby the dominant modes of thought and experience inherent in the social and physical world are internalised by us.

I would argue, using Bourdieu's conceptualisation, that the habitus and practice of sport links into the struggle for other forms of capital, particularly in this case, sexual capital. Being aware of the equation, *not feminine = masculine = butch = lesbian* (which I elaborate on later) is very important. It is indicative of the context in which women's sport is being played and perceived. It plays a huge role in players' self-

perception and self-definition. The attempt to “give equal weight to the logic of the structure, the logic of practitioners, and the practice...is at the heart of Bourdieu’s sociological project” (Wacquant, 1992: 5-11). With this in mind, I will critically explore the social construction of *not feminine = masculine = butch = lesbian* in the Irish sporting arena.

### **Sport as a Male Preserve**

The sport world represents the last bastion of a separate and identifiable male world. In a world where physical strength is no longer a necessity for daily living, sport has taken on an important symbolic significance (Darlison, 1983: 55).

Research into sport as a male preserve (Dunning, 1986; Connell, 1990, 1995; Messner, 1994; Messner and Sabo, 1990 ) has highlighted the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ - “the cultural dominance of a masculinity that embodies traits which legitimate patriarchy, the dominant position of some men over others and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995: 77). Hence, for some men, status is gained through athletic prowess (Mac an Ghail, 1994, 1996; Connell, 1995).

Sport serves to bolster “a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the twentieth century” (Messner, 1994: 66). This is in line with Kimmel’s (1987a, 1987b) arguments and also Dunning’s (1986) ideas on the crises in twentieth century masculinity, and subsequent feminist movements. Through the types of sport that men play and their celebration of this in the public sphere, the perpetuation of the myth of ‘to be a man, you must play sport’ is continued. However, it must be noted here that hegemonic masculinity is not static, it is constantly challenged and reconstructed. Kimmel (1990) provides a clear example of this in his work on baseball and the reconstitution of American masculinity.

It was not just masculinity that was reconstituted through sports but a particular kind of masculinity - white and middle-class - that was elaborated...

masculinity that reinforced the unequal distribution of power based on class, race, and gender (1990: 65).

In the social and common-sense construction of the duality of gender and the binary oppositions of 'masculine' and 'feminine', both masculinity, femininity and sexuality are defined in terms of what they are not. To be male is not to be female, to be female is not to be male, and to be heterosexual is not to be gay. Strictly masculine behaviour (or 'hyper' masculinity) avoids all behaviour that remotely suggests the feminine. Without doubt the biological/essentialist argument highlighting the innate physical differences between the sexes is important. However, knowing why women can only muster ninety per cent of a man's strength cannot help us understand or challenge the 'common-sense' view and the social perception that a woman "has no business flexing her muscles anyway" (Willis, 1994: 33). Femininity, in the context of a heterosexually dominated society, is constructed around female attractiveness. Sportswomen have come to challenge this construction through their 'deviance' from normative ideals about female bodies and hegemonic notions of an 'ideal' femininity. This has important consequences for the participation of homosexual athletes in sport, particularly the participation of lesbians in traditionally associated male sports.

### **'Mannish', 'Manly' or just 'Amazons'?**

Fasting and Scraton (1997) highlight the main issue in the social construction of femininity based on white, middle-class, western assumptions; and, sportswomen as deviant in the context of a male-dominated sporting world where

...we don't have a word - or even a concept - for a 'tall strong feminine woman' ... We have instead the word amazon, a term equated with female power and in the same breath with masculinity and therefore deviance or aberrance (Nelson, 1994: 67).

In accepting (or seeming to accept) the terms of the ideological definition of heterosexuality, and consequently masculinity and femininity, lesbian athletes can be perceived as seeking to emulate the 'man', be more like the man, reinforcing popular ideology. Has this possibly been the case with the reactions of Martina Hingis and Lindsay Davenport to the achievements of the lesbian and French tennis player Amelie Mauresmo in this year's Australian Open? Comments referring to Mauresmo being "half a man" and "tennis is not normally played like that" (Parsons, 1999) are indicative of this. The challenge to this interpretation lies in the relation between cultural and biological definitions of gender i.e. the common-sense view of women, and women in sport.

Women who have participated and participate in sport have been perceived, defined and sometimes, controlled in two main ways: being 'mannish' (which in context is seen to represent excessive heterosexuality) and being 'manly' (which is seen to represent failed heterosexuality) (Cahn, 1994a). The 'mannish' athlete challenges notions of gender, but NOT sex. The emergence of lesbian taboos as part of a large social and cultural change in views of, and on sexuality, influenced this shift in perceptions of female athletes from 'mannishness' to 'manliness'. This, accompanied by economic, religious, scientific, cultural and medical changes, and changes in the leisure sphere led to the equation of lesbianism and sport with 'masculine' desires, hence questioning the 'femininity' and physical sexuality of lesbian athletes. The 'manly' athlete came to challenge notions of sex, as she assumed the identity of a 'man' and had male characteristics, likes and desires.

The underlying ideology behind the perception of the 'manliness' of lesbian athletes within the arena of sport and gender dynamics is the presumption that *lesbianism involves masculine qualities or desires, and its consequences for the non-separation (at a cultural level) of the concept of athletic superiority from its cultural affiliation with masculine sport and the male body*. The perception of femininity (and its realignment) is poised on the edge between appealing and threatening aspects of male

and female attraction towards women, and perceptions of that attraction. When women argue that sport will not masculinise women (one of the reactions to the labels of ‘mannishness’ and ‘manliness’), by implication they are raising the issue of whether sport could cease to masculinise men.

### **Sporting Females**

Women participating in traditionally associated male sports can reinforce and/or challenge the ways in which we think about femininity, masculinity and the body. In this vein, Balsamo (1994: 345) argues that “technologically recrafted female bodies are delegitimated as cultural markers of proper femininity”. The ‘quality’ of muscle definition is an ongoing issue in the judging of female bodybuilding contests.

First and foremost, the judge must bear in mind that he or she is judging a woman’s bodybuilding competition and is looking for an ideal feminine physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape, a feminine shape.

Other aspects are similar to those described for assessing men, but in regard to muscular development, it must not be carried to excess where it resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique (Kennedy and Mason, 1984: 181).

Camilla Obel (1996: 185) argues that “bodybuilding is a challenge to categorical ways of thinking about femininity, masculinity and the body”. However, if you shift the focus of research to the bodybuilders themselves, she contends that their discourse reinforces the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. Through interviews, she provides evidence that the participants’ emphasis is on “diffusing the tension between muscularity and what is viewed as ‘safe femininity’” (1996: 185). The female bodybuilders, in this case, comply with an acceptable heterosexual femininity. Indeed Whitson (1994) shows how sports and other forms of physical competence have

naturalised norms of male strength and female weakness, and have actively reproduced these through developmental practices that have taught males and females to live their bodies in active or passive ways (1994: 367).

In parallel with the association of sporting participation and athletic prowess with lesbianism, we also see the objectification and sexualisation of the achievements of female athletes, Irish and otherwise. One American writer's account of Florence Joyner Griffith's record breaking performances in the U.S. Olympic trials of 1988 began as follows;

Okay, let's get the important stuff out of the way first. Florence Joyner Griffith wore a shocking pink one-legger with a white bikini bottom in the first round. She wore a fluorescent gold body suit with an orange print string bikini bottom in the quarterfinals Friday night. For both races, the fingernails on her left hand were painted cobalt blue and decorated with Hawaiian scenes, including palm trees, birds and the moon. The fingernails on her right hand were multicoloured with a variety of rhinestone designs, including a cross. It took her three to five minutes to do each nail...By the way, it took her nowhere that long to run the 200 metres Friday night. In fact, it took her less time than any American woman in history (21.77 seconds, .04 seconds faster than the American record) (Hersch, 1988: 1).

Her appearance was sexualised, but may also have invoked the production of stereotypical comments about her sexual attractiveness, what is referred to later as 'regressive femininity'. Another example is the objectified and sexualised portrayal of Michelle Smith's exploits in the 1996 Olympics which highlights the response to the dissonance between masculine sport and feminine womanhood and, in some ways, serves to broaden rather than narrow the gap.

Poolside moments. Michelle Smith, face wreathed in happiness and rivulets of water streaming down her body, fell into the arms of her husband and coach Erik de Bruin...Before that, Michelle Smith had already felt the crush of an

embrace from the Minister of State for Sport, Mr Bernard Allen (Humphries, 1996).

The objectification and sexualisation of the achievements of female athletes is linked to the construction of heterosexual femininity in the sporting field. The shift in the perception of female athletes as having unbridled heterosexual desire ('mannishness'), to the prospect that 'masculine' sport might loosen women's inhibitions toward men (an indication of failed heterosexuality - 'manliness') is one of the central themes of my research. It is one of the key ways in which Irish society has controlled the participation of women in sport, in terms of numbers but also in terms of whether participation is to happen, in what sport, and how it is to be conducted - this is, in reality, 'pseudo inclusion' into the sporting arena but within the pre-existing ideology of sport as a male preserve.

Sociological research into Irish sexuality has been noteworthy by its absence (Inglis 1997). It is even more noteworthy that the experiences of Irish women, in particular Irish sportswomen, have been largely ignored in comparison with sportsmen, and in view of research findings that point to sport as a 'male preserve' (e.g. Connell 1990; Dunning 1986). Similar to Obel (1996), Young (1997), and Fasting and Scraton (1997), I argue that it is of vital importance that the qualitative accounts of sportswomen themselves be heard. For the past century the Irish sporting arena has been a key site for the construction, reconstruction and contestation of cultural conceptions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. The controversies surrounding female athleticism broach fundamental questions about the content and definition of Irish woman- and man-hood. Maleness has been, and is repeatedly linked with strength, skill, aggression, toughness and often violence in the Irish context (Mac an Ghail, 1994, 1996).

The challenge that exists today (and indeed that has existed in the past) is to Irish sportswomen's participation in an arena that is broadly regarded as being a 'male preserve'. Some questions that then arise raise fundamental issues regarding social

attitudes and their relative effects on the individual. Do women engaging in a traditionally-associated male activity become more man-like? What exactly are 'manly' and 'womanly' qualities? Are lesbians participating in these sports doubly branded as 'manly' due to their sporting activities and because of their sexual desires? And, if athleticism was not essentially masculine does this then mean that all gender differences are mutable and not ordained by, and permanently ensconced in, nature?

As a stigmatised figure, the mannish lesbian functions as a powerful bogeywoman of sport, silently foiling the efforts of sport advocates to rehabilitate the reputation of women athletes and resolve the cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity (Cahn, 1994a: 165).

When some women's sports, if not all at some time, are labelled a 'non-feminine' and/or lesbian activity, all women in sport (and women in the broader social context) are particularly sensitive and vulnerable to the use of the lesbian label to intimidate them. The label 'girljock' is used extensively in American literature to denote a lesbian athlete (Sandoz, 1994; Roxxie and Dagger, 1998). The equation of lesbianism with athletic participation and prowess operates in a number of ways in contemporary Irish sport: it marks the line of athletic deviance; it challenges the boundaries of perceptions of femininity; and, it acts as a counter challenge to the 'movement' of boundaries, what Nelson (1998) refers to as 'regressive femininity'. This last point is a reminder that what counts as resistance must always be reconsidered.

### **The Sporting Field - Irish and International**

In the case of the U.S., claims linking the mannish female athlete to lesbianism surfaced in the medical community as early as the 1880's when sexologist Havelock Ellis commented that among lesbians "there is often some capacity for athletics" (1915: 250). The Irish Ladies' Golfing Union was established in 1893. Originally

dubbed ‘petticoats on the links’, there is ample evidence of similar (but not necessarily the same) attitudes as Ellis (1915) towards the ladies’ game. ‘Pseudo inclusion’ was encouraged. One newspaper report of 1890 commented that

it is well that the physically weaker sex should be encouraged to engage in outdoor games suitable to their powers and such as can be indulged in without loss of that sweet decorum which must always be the sex’s greatest charm (Gilleece and Redmond, 1993: 66).

Dress codes were, and still are an indication of the perceptions of women in sport, and their appropriateness of dress. Slurs on female golfers as being ‘athletic women’ prompted the wearing of smart and respectable dress.

From the time of Queen Elizabeth, when ladies went hawking in heavy brocades and fine lace, we have come by gradual stages to the present day when women choose their sports clothes for appropriateness as well as smartness... Whether she be the modest amateur or a budding champion, there is no excuse for a woman to look anything but charming as she strides along the fairway (Gilleece and Redmond, 1993: 40-41).

May Hezlet, an eminent female golfer of the early twentieth century wrote that “outrageous or indifferent dressing raises remarks about ‘athletic women’” (Gilleece and Redmond, 1993: 42).

These comments, and others mentioned later, are indicative of permutations of the equation of *not feminine* = *masculine* = *butch* = *lesbian* in perceptions of women in society, and particularly, in sport. What is also of interest here are the different terms used to describe sporting females e.g. ‘lady’, ‘ladies’ and ‘women’ and ‘athletic women’. This can be seen today in the use of the term ‘ladies’ in the tennis world and, ‘women’ in rugby. These terms vary over time, according to different sports and represent different social perceptions of femininity. Similarly, my focus on the emergence of the ‘lesbian’ connotation in women’s sports is possibly a further extension of this.

The case of women's soccer in Ireland is interesting in the unfolding of perceptions of femininity. Soccer is commonly accepted as a 'lesbian' activity and a way of self-identification. "Everyone who plays soccer is a lesbian"<sup>1</sup>. A current Irish female international raised the point of the association between playing soccer (which is traditionally regarded as a male sport) and perceptions of femininity when she said:

Every young girl in this country has to deal with being called a tomboy just because they play soccer. It's not like that anywhere else especially in the U.S. simply because more girls than boys play the game there (Brennan, 1999).

Research into women's soccer in Norway and England (Fasting and Scraton, 1997; Caudwell, 1998) has shown that players subverted, to a certain degree, the traditional meanings of masculinity and femininity, changing it through their practices. However, it was apparent from the research that the notions of ambiguity, conflict and sexuality appear much stronger in the English context. Having a 'masculine' appearance has a negative connotation and mirrors a strong degree of homophobia.

The main difference between Norwegian and English perceptions of masculinity and femininity, within the sporting context of female soccer, was that the Norwegians had a relatively clear perception that both were independent of the "strong association with heterosexuality and gender" (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 8). This was attributed, by the authors, to the historical, social and cultural differences between the two countries which raises interesting questions in the case of Ireland. There were, however, similarities between the two groups in the way that femininity was defined primarily through appearance. "Feminine is to have long, light curly hair, make up, always nice dresses, women who use one hour before the mirror every morning" (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 6). This equation of femininity with appearance is also borne out in my preliminary qualitative research where the term 'dollybird' was used.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote by 'Jojo', interviewed April 1999. Interviewee chose this as her pseudonym as she wanted to remain anonymous.

However, the English players actively used their appearance to resist the stereotype of being a lesbian player - a 'girljock'. I argue that the Norwegians may have actively used their appearance in this way also. Many of the Norwegians defined themselves as 'tomboys' but this did not take away from their femininity. An example of a response to this was "I am a woman but not so feminine" (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 6). Again, we see the potential to resist stereotypes and change perceptions through practice. However, it is interesting to note that the respondent does equate being a 'tomboy' with 'not being so feminine' which indicates a relative level of awareness of the interdependency between masculinity and femininity. The Norwegians also expressed some freedom in self-definition. They were more or less masculine or feminine depending on the context in which they were e.g.

Many of those who play football are very manly and masculine, so if I am with them, then I can feel very feminine. But if I am with my girlfriends at home who don't participate in any sport, or who only do aerobics to keep their thighs firm, then it is more difficult to have the feeling of being a woman (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 7).

For the English respondents, not being feminine implies being 'butch' which is indicative, according to the authors, of ambiguity about sexuality. "Masculine is just butch, muscular. Like clothes like a woman trying to be a man" (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 8). This combination of *not feminine = masculine = butch* does not arise in the Norwegian context.

So we see that femininity is equated with appearance, language, the body, and some personality traits. These aspects of femininity are also borne out in my preliminary qualitative research which may provide an interesting comparison with the English research. Also of interest is the evidence that masculinity is strongly associated with sport for all the English players. One Norwegian response to this equation was "I believe it is a common attitude that sports women are not masculine, but present

themselves as masculine” (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 9). In both contexts, players argued that sport does not masculinise women. This is also strongly supported by data from my interviews.

However, again, there is a linking of sport and sexuality in the English context.

There are a lot of narrow minded people around...they say that if women get involved in sport then they aren't feminine. You are made to get married and have kids. If involved in sport you're a lesbian, a dyke and all the rest (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 9).

Interestingly, most saw having muscles as contrary to expectations of being feminine. This supports the research into female bodybuilding and the portrayal of women's bodies as muscular. One English player commented “I don't like to see women like weight lifters, I don't like to see women over the top, but toned up I don't mind” (Fasting and Scraton, 1997: 10).

**To succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman because...**

**she may be seen as a man.**

“They seem to think camogie is only for half-men, half-women, that the players are all very butch... we can take the knocks as well as the men” (Shannon, 1999).

This comment by Kilkenny camogie player Tracy Millea unambiguously highlights the association between female participation in traditionally associated male sports and, perceptions of femininity and indeed sexuality. If the label of ‘mannish’, ‘butch’ or ‘half-men’ already exists, then lesbian participation can be taken as a reinforcement of this.

The stigmatised ‘mannish’/‘manly’ lesbian athlete announces to all women that competitiveness, strength, independence and aggression are privileged features of manhood, or conversely, the mark of unacceptable womanhood. She represents the

border that must not be crossed, a cultural exemplar reminding all women to toe the line of heterosexual femininity or risk falling into a despised category of (not-women) women. Being aware of this equation, *not feminine = masculine = butch = lesbian* in the Irish context is, in my opinion, very important. It is indicative of the context in which women's sport is being played and perceived. This is borne out again in my preliminary interviews with female soccer, cricket and rugby players. It also greatly affects the players themselves, whether hetero- or homo-sexual. It plays a huge role in players' self-perception and self-definition. One female international Irish player commented that she was "safe from that" now that she was getting married, 'that' being a reference to the lesbian label attached to women's participation in soccer in Ireland. Another verbal comment by a manager of an international Irish ladies' team reinforces the previous comment - "I want to get rid of the element", the 'element' being the participation of lesbians and, as he saw it, the labelling of the sport as a 'lesbian' activity as a result of this participation<sup>2</sup>.

The equation of sporting participation and prowess with lesbianism operates in a number of ways in contemporary Irish sport: it marks the line of athletic deviance; it challenges the boundaries and perceptions of femininity; and, it acts as a counter challenge to the 'movement' of boundaries. This is why I again return to my argument of hearing the voices of the players themselves - "the logic of the practitioners" (Inglis, 1997: 17) - because it is evident from hearing their accounts that they are subverting traditional perceptions of masculinity and femininity, and changing these through their practices. E.G. "I like to get really muddy and do what the heck I like on the football pitch...I think I get fed up being labelled" (Scraton et al, 1999: 106). Another player interviewed by Scraton and her colleagues referred to the physical and mental stimulation obtained from playing soccer - "playing soccer you can find out what you and your body can do, what you can do with a ball, to juggle with a ball, to let it fly in a high angle (1999: 107).

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from author's field notes compiled during participant observation.

## **Conclusion**

Perceptions of gender and sexuality intersperse with and within the sporting arena. Theberge (1994) sees sport as giving the potential to transform gender relations through physical activity which gives meaning to women's experience. This is supported by Fasting and Scraton (1997: 3) who see the sporting sphere as

an important sphere for the disruption of the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity and the emergence of potentially transgressive forms of sporting femininities.

Similarly, Wheatley (1994: 160) argues that the subculture of Australian women's rugby

...intersects with men's rugby and lesbian subcultures. In this capacity, the women's rugby subculture simultaneously reproduces and transforms various features of the men's rugby style, while establishing a cultural space in which lesbian identity, culture, and style are constructed, lived out, struggled over, and sometimes resisted in complex and contradictory ways (Wheatley, 1994: 194).

Female participation in sport can highlight the common-sense view of masculinity and femininity being 'two sides of the one coin', a dualistic perception which does not allow for alternatives or variations. It can also challenge these boundaries of masculinity and femininity as well as reinforce them (Nelson, 1991).

However, theoretically we need more than just a simplistic and dualistic understanding of masculinity and femininity. We need to understand the complexities and ambiguities of both women's and men's experiences. We also need to be aware that "the dominant sporting script still requires a large degree of sexual and social conformity from women players" (Wright and Clarke, 1999: 241). Central to this dilemma of self-expression and identity is power - the power to define sportswomen

as gendered and sexualised and, the power of sportswomen to resist this, to become empowered and self-defining.

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French Quiz Masculine Feminine. Developer: Pamplemousse Apps (21). For each game type, you pick the correct french determinant. either "le", "la", "l'", "un" or "une". You can keep your score for every game type to view your progress. More words will be added soon! more . Content Rating: Everyone 4+. Google Play Rating: 4.3 (31). Data Source: Google Play. Lists (0). «French Quiz Masculine Feminine». Add to List. Reviews (0).