

UNC Basketball: Gendered Bias and the Student Spectator Experience

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Upon my arrival at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), it did not take me long to realise just how big of a thing basketball is here. The pride in the school runs deep and so does the passion about said dribbling- and dunk-filled sport. This is ultimately what made me decide to do an ethnographic study of the student spectator experience at collegiate basketball games at UNC. It is an important consideration here that basketball is subject to a gender bias. While the university has both a men's and a women's team competing at the highest level, they do not garner remotely the same levels of support from students. In this paper, I examine how this gendered bias in collegiate basketball at UNC both influences and is reflected in the student spectator experience. I rely on participant observation and informal interviews of student spectators at both the men's and the women's home games during the Atlantic Coast Conference tournament, as well as my everyday experience on UNC campus to substantiate my findings. During the basketball games, I was in what El-Shaarawi refers to as a 'double role': I was at the same time conducting fieldwork whilst also being an active student spectator, thereby to some extent forming part of my own ethnography (2015: 42).

College Community through Sports

It can be hard to fully grasp the phenomenon of college sport in the United States, unless you have experienced it yourself. Not only is it big, but it is much bigger and more comprehensive than I could ever have anticipated prior to coming to UNC. This

to the extent that varsity sports are often fundamental to the sense of community on college campuses, as has been studied by Warner and Dixon (2010) in relation to student participation in sports. Drawing on their work, I argue that the same framework can be applied to the student spectators I have studied at UNC basketball games. During an orientation at the beginning of term, we were told that "spring is basketball season", and it came with the insinuation that it would likely be a factor that would strongly impact our experience here at UNC. One Saturday afternoon not long after that, I was waiting in front of the school library, when I overheard a current student tell prospective students and their parents how she prior to commencing her university studies had not really held any interest in basketball. After experiencing her first basketball season, however, she found herself a huge UNC fan, this especially due to how it brought so many students together and created a great atmosphere at home games. It is a narrative reflected among several of the students I have spoken. In general, many seem to engage in basketball-related activities solely because of the value it adds to their college experience, regardless of how much of an interest they otherwise hold in the sport. This was highlighted during an interview with a friend of mine who said, "honestly, once I leave UNC, I will probably never pay attention to basketball again". Here, it is important to emphasise a significant aspect of the UNC basketball discourse that has been addressed to far. When most students talked about their enthusiasm and experience of community surrounding basketball, they implicitly referred to the UNC men's basketball team, not so much the women's. This suggests that the student support is not extended equally towards the university's two basketball teams, consequently pointing towards a gendered bias.

The Student Ticket Lottery

One way in which the disparities in student support for the university's two varsity basketball teams is evident is through the need for a student ticket lottery to control student admission to the men's games despite playing in a much bigger arena than the women's team. Laura Pappano and Allison Tracey (2009) conducted a study on gendered pricing gaps for paying spectators at Division I college basketball games, concluding that revenue stream and perceived popularity of a team shape spectatorship. Although student tickets to UNC basketball are free, I argue that the same bias can still be found here. Although posters were used to advertise the women's home games, luring students to attend with the promise of a free t-shirt, the student section often resembled a ghost town. Only when the women's team played Duke University at their home arena, did they draw somewhat of a crowd, creating an atmosphere resembling that of a men's game. Many students I talked to had never attended a women's game, while they had attended at least one or more men's game. Additionally, several did not know that no student ticket lottery is enforced for admission to the women's games. On the other hand, most of them did not hesitate to wait several hours in advance for entrance to the men's games and a chance at the best possible seat. For the most part, it boils down to how men have been socialised to be considered better at sports and women in contrast have come to be considered less capable of high-level competition and play (Frey and Eitzen 1991: 516). This was clear in my fieldwork when a student proclaimed that "women can't dunk", listing it as a reason for not being interested in attending a women's basketball game.

Understanding the Community of Basketball Jerseys

Another important observation is how most students at men's games are decked out in

basketball jerseys or anything Carolina blue (a shade of light blue that is the official school colour of UNC), while the few students attending women's games tend to wear normal clothes. This becomes important when understanding the work of Daniel Miller, who argues that we can understand people through their relationship with things and how they might tie into their relationship with other people. He points to how people tend to create a sense of home that is connected to certain objects, which might possibly limit mobility if too many material possessions are accumulated. As a result, the objects people keep around them, or the lack thereof, can say a lot about individuals and how they have chosen to live their lives (Miller 2010: 67). Evidently, the community surrounding men's basketball has a materialised culture to it in the shape of the multitude of memorabilia and gear present at home games. These items become a strong symbol of collective support through which students form a relationship with each other, tying them into a wider community that surrounds UNC basketball. Equally, the lack thereof at the women's home games is important to consider. Only a few students would wear any form of Carolina gear to show their support for the women's team when they played at their home arena. Among those who did, most simply wore something in the school's colours or with the school's logo on, rather than a UNC basketball jersey. This stands in stark contrast to the many jerseys worn by the student crowd at the men's games. Also, a remarkable observation about the occasional basketball jersey found at the women's home games is the fact that most had the name of a former male UNC basketball player printed on the back – the famous Michael Jordan. How great it would have been to see the names of any of the excellent female basketball players on the back of those jerseys.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that a sense of community has been created among student spectators at collegiate basketball games at UNC, which has enhanced their experience at university. And yet, while not mentioned explicitly in daily discourse, the implication is that 'UNC Basketball' refers to the men's basketball team and not its female counterpart. The popularity of the men's team has led to the need for controlled student admission to their home games, which has not been necessary at

the women's home games, seeing as they garner significantly less support. The main reasoning behind this tie into attitudes of male superiority and dominance in the sport. Furthermore, I have highlighted how material objects, such as basketball jerseys, can allow for the creation of a strong sense of community at games. This comes to show how sports indeed is "an arena of patterned behaviours [and] social structures" (Frey and Eitzen 1991: 503). As a result, it can be highly useful when studying certain social complexities.

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