Got Balls? An Ethnographic Analysis of the Gendered Divisions of Sport within the United Kingdom and the Wider Athletic Community

Chelsea Berry

During the past two years I have spent attending the University of St Andrews, I have personally experienced, and been witness to, what has become a very apparent sexual dichotomy within British athletics. In my time as a female footballer I have been called many things: 'lesbian', 'lad', 'beast', 'dude', 'baller', 'mate', 'champion', 'predator', to name a few, but never have I been called or referred to as a girl, feminine, or female on the pitch. As a burgeoning anthropologist, I ask myself, why is this so? What makes it so difficult for men and even women to associate sport and athleticism with the female/feminine identity which is constructed by modern Western society? What cultural associations or ideals have created this normative behaviour, and why do they continue to separate men from women in sport? To answer these questions, this ethnography will include a detailed anthropological analysis of sport theory in relation to feminist literature regarding gender, sex, sexuality, and the cultural perception and projection of these mentally constructed identities onto women within Western society. By simultaneously assessing the theories of academics such as Pamela Creedon, Patrick F. McDevitt, Allen Warren, Judith Butler, and Linda K. Fuller with my personal experiences interviewing female footballers, male footballers, and football fans, I aim to prove that women and men are intrinsically separated from each other within British sporting society due to the structural devices of male power.

As stated by Pamela L. Creedon, 'sport is an expression of the sociocultural system in which it occurs; and sports mirror the rituals and values of the societies in which they are developed' (Creedon 1994: 3-4). Sport, and mental perceptions of its reality, is therefore intrinsically influenced by a specific community's traditional perceptions of the social and physical roles of the individual or group participating in its performance. My aim in conducting my field work within the athletic community in St Andrews was to try to gain a sense of what these social and physical roles discussed by Creedon are within British culture, through the observation, study, and analysis of the game of football, the impressions and actions of male and female 'footballers', and their fans. As I began my field work, it became obvious that the origins of the ideas which footballers and random observers have regarding the game, and the men and women who play it, are lodged within a long tradition of British sport and a cultural inclination towards the personification of the powerful male

persona. According to Patrick F. McDevitt, 'various communities of men within the British Empire used sport to construct, propagate, and maintain national conceptions of manhood' (McDevitt 2004: 2). The British sporting arena or pitch has therefore become a socially accepted and encouraged place for the public display of 'manliness and virility', which provides onlookers with entertainment and instils within them a sense of confidence in the strength, athleticism, and power of their countrymen (McDevitt 2004: 2). Allen Warren's (1993) reflections on sport within Britain during the late 1800s and mid-1900s continue this nationalistic theory whilst analysing the initial social effects and reactions to the incorporation of women into sport and athletic culture during the past century. In his analysis, Warren states that, while it was acceptable for women to engage in sports which emphasized and accommodated their perceived feminine natures, such as croquet which requires relatively minimal athletic exertion, during the early twentieth century it was not socially acceptable for women to engage in sports like football or rugby which were incontestably perceived as masculine in nature. These associations are what have made the introduction and continued assimilation of women into sport today so hard for English athletes and society to accept. Furthermore, the inherent association of sport and male power fundamentally define English patriotism and pride, thereby positing male sport as the epitome the English culture and empire. These observations made me ask the following questions: if sport and athleticism was, and still is, so tied up in notions of masculinity and male power, how do women fit into the picture? If it is generally perceived to be necessary for athletes to act in such hyper-masculine ways in order to succeed, can women still be considered feminine when their actions in sport go against everything the notion embodies? Why is it so difficult to see women as women when they are acting as athletes? And finally, in this modern, liberal age, why do these gendered stereotypes continue?

Sitting on a sunny porch overlooking the whitewashed parking lot of a cheap hotel in Albufeira, Portugal, pen and piña colada in hand, I ask my fellow University of St Andrews Women's Football team mates, Leah and Sally, of their opinions on the status of female sport in the UK, and of their impressions of the reactions they encounter when they inform people of their athletic activities. 'I don't really tell people anymore,' Leah reveals after a brief pause for thought, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly. This comment struck me as odd, knowing how much Leah loves watching football, playing football, and talking about watching and playing football. When I asked why, she replied, 'I didn't think they'd like it.' She proceeds to explain that when she came to Scotland from

America, where she grew up, she was struck with how different the sporting community was in the UK from the one she had recently left in the States. 'Girls don't really play sports except for ones like hockey or netball,' she says, scrunching her nose in distaste. She explains that in coming here, she soon discovered football is predominately a male sport and that when strangers, usually men, learn of her ability to play, their reactions are mainly those of surprise and/or distaste. 'When it comes to guys,' she says, 'they seem to be surprised and confused, asking, "Which kind? Football-football or American Football?"', as if it is more believable that she could play full contact American Football along-side 200-plus-pound men, as opposed to the relatively no contact English sport and pastime. She goes on to say that, 'they [men] never include us in pick-up games let alone legitimate football leagues.'

It is at this point that Sally pipes in very loudly and aggressively, as is her nature, 'they [men] always want to challenge me… I always win,' flashing a devilish grin and comically flexing her muscles to emphasize her point. From this statement it becomes clear that Sally, unlike Leah, has no scruples about telling women or men about her athletic achievements or her status as a female footballer. She continues by saying that she enjoys that she can 'intimidate' men with the mere mention of football, and appreciates the 'respect' which she gains from it. Having spent many hours on and off the pitch with Sally, I had expected such a reaction to my questions, but Leah's comments still puzzled me. Why would such a confident and athletically able woman feel the need to hide her ability and knowledge of sport? When I voiced my surprise to her, she responded that she found that men, 'tend to miss-label me as a lesbian, they stop seeing me as a girl and start thinking, "lad".' Later that night, when we had moved into our cluttered living room, I asked another teammate of mine, Ashley, the same questions I asked of Leah and Sally. Lounging on the worn couches amongst sandy piles of discarded beach towels, empty beer bottles, and assorted scrabble pieces from our game earlier that day, she scratches her blonde head and says after short deliberation, 'guys ask, "ah geez, are you a lesbian?", and girls are more diplomatic about it, being like, "awesome! Way to go"… yeah, that's about it.' Again I was surprised about Ashley's reaction. Knowing how much she loves the sport, how could she have so little to say about it? Have Ashley and Leah become accustomed to not talking about female football during their time in Scotland because of the unfeminine associations tied to it? More importantly, why is it so common for men to associate female footballers with lesbianism? To try to answer these questions, I turned to theories regarding the common theme of sexuality within their statements, and the construction

of masculinity and femininity within British sport.

According to Patrick Ismond, human society is fundamentally characterized by the 'social struggle for control of the physical body' (Ismond 2003: 127). Men and women are categorized by the strict conceptions of sexuality which dictate individual and group action. A woman's femininity and its emulation therefore play crucial roles in the promotion of the physical construction of the ideal feminine being just as a man's masculinity is tantamount in creating his personal identity within modern capitalist Western society. Henceforth, the physical emulation of these abstract concepts has become a social movement in and of itself, creating complex systems of social, political, and economic action within Western societies like Britain, which encourage women to achieve the ideal physical female form and nature. It is in this way that the female body has become a social artifice, used to promote the achievement and embodiment of the stereotypical ideals of the refined, modest, and elegant woman, which have been created within the modern capitalist era.

According to Judith Butler, 'contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize' women within modern Western societies, confining them within strict classifications of femininity, and the expectations of the contemporary female sexual identity (Butler 2002: 8). This sense of determinism and immobility stressed by Butler is encapsulated within feminist critique of sport, and the perceptions and presuppositions of power associated with its enactment. As hypothesized by Linda K. Fuller, sport is fundamentally characterized by 'an underpinning of sex and sexuality'; gender has become a critical point of debate and controversy within athletics as a result of these underlying structural assumptions (Fuller 2006: 6). Sexual identities and gender roles have, according to L. Marlene Mawson (2006), created a double standard of ethical athletic behaviour within sports. She states that while men are allowed by society to act aggressively towards opponents in sport without judgement being made on their personal characters, women are expected to restrain their aggression and act in more feminine polite ways in order for them to be dually respected as athletes and individuals. This concept of 'sportswomanship' is perceived as necessary in the preservation of women's feminine identity within sport and athletic endeavours, and is indicative of the sexism and gender bias which is present with the modern sporting community (Mawson 2006: 20). Although women have been liberated through the recognition of their equality to men through the institution of rights, such as suffrage, Kathleen E. McCrone's historical analysis of Victorian athletics demonstrates that not much has changed with regards to

society's perception of women. They are generally 'considered innately physically inferior to men,' especially when it comes to sport and athleticism (McCrone 1987: 97).

Henrietta L. Moore's (1988) analysis sheds light on McCrone's conception of female physical inferiority by identifying the patterns and personifications of separation and sexualized social divisions, affirming that, in the words of Moore, 'biological differences between men and women take on significance… within culturally defined value systems' (Moore 1988: 14). Moore continues this argument by stating that women are generally associated with the private or natural aspects and places within society, like the home and children, while men are generally associated with the public or cultural aspects of society, like business and trade. These figurative spatial associations are what Moore claims to have constructed the man/male/masculine and woman/female/feminine identities which exist within all aspects of individual and/or group action, and are the root of the constructed male dominance which engenders sport and the rest of human society. This mentality of female inferiority and male superiority is what I witnessed within my ethnographic fieldwork, interviewing female and male footballers, as well as spectators to the sport.

The opinions and observations which I gathered during my interviews and casual bar side chats were varied in content and diction, but all ultimately expressed irresolution of thought and/or acceptance in addition to an air of overriding confusion when it came to women's participation in the game of Football, and/or any other popular sports in Britain. Additionally, I found that this confusion is intrinsically tied to the inability to rationalize women's abilities to maintain female identities within the masculine domain of sport. As explained by Jeffrey O. Segrave et al. (2006), this inability to reconcile women with sport is the reason why men tend to project often unwarranted masculine personas onto female athletes' identities, labelling them as manly, butch, or lesbian. It therefore can be said that female athletes challenged the limits and definition of sport and athletics by merely being women.[1]

Sitting on the worn velvet cushion of a rickety bar stool of the Raisin pub in St Andrews,

1 Although I have applied Creedon's (1994), Fuller's (2006), Mawson's (2006), and Segrave et al.'s (2006) respective theories on women and sport to my analysis of British sport, they were initially based off of research in the United States. The paucity of research done on gender divisions and femininity in British sport made it necessary for me to use American sources, a fact which I feel reflects the social aversion to women athletes in Britain.

surrounded by strangers, my football mates and I keenly watch the Chelsea vs Manchester United, game which is playing on numerous television screens around the bar. As I try to order my pint amidst the din of mixed chat, jeering insults, boastful declarations, and playful banter which is coming from every corner of the bar, I take in the scene and the electric atmosphere, studying the people who surround us. I quickly observe that we are the only women there, surrounded by numerous groups of men ranging in age from their twenties to mid-fifties. As I scan the crowd, I realize that some of the men have made this same observation, their eyes darting regularly in our direction whilst leaning over to comment discreetly in their friends' ears about what I can only imagine. Sipping my beer casually, I lean over to my friend Leah to remark on the play a Man U striker has just completed, a slicing cross into the box which nearly became an assist to his fellow wingman across the pitch. I refer back to a game we'd played against Stirling University earlier last year, where Leah had made an incredible pass up the line to our striker, Anya, who went up the pitch to make a beautiful goal. We joke about Man U's inability to deliver as we did, knowing full well that the comparison is laughable. The man sitting next to us at the bar, who until this moment, had remained seemingly uninterested in our presence next to him, leans over to Leah and playfully states, 'I can't sit next to you if you're supporting Chelsea,' adding a cheeky wink for effect. Leah smiles and says enthusiastically, 'oh, I don't support Chelsea… I'm a Spurs fan.' To this he reacts with surprise, raising his large eyebrows and asks me if I support Man U. I say, 'yeah, I grew up watching them play with my dad.' Our chat continues in this casual fashion, until he asked us how we know so much about football, to which I replied, 'we play on the women's team for the University.' He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, making little eye contact; 'all right,' he says. Turning away from us, he proceeds to order another drink, and leaves to join his friends who had been playing a game of snooker across the room.

'You see,' Leah says, 'this is why I don't tell people anymore, it just scares them, look how fast he ran away from the lesbians!' We laugh and carry on watching the game, but I can't stop thinking about his reaction, remembering the amount of times men and women alike have removed themselves from conversations after discovering my athletic abilities and knowledge. Still sitting at the bar, my mind flashes back to a memory of a similar night I had in the West Port bar during the spring of last year, where I had been talking to my mates Ruairi, Spencer, Rory, Nick, and Sebastian from my six-a-side recreational football team after one of our Wednesday matches. As we chat about some of the more memorable plays of the game, Rory brings up the moment when I had

floored a guy who had come-up against my defensive skills. 'You out muscled him! Did you see his face?! It was brilliant!' he crows gleefully. 'It was pretty cool,' Ruairi adds, 'I don't think they were expecting you to give them such a run for their money.' As the chat continues, it becomes clear that after having proven myself athletically, they now counted me as one of the guys, a fellow, a 'lad', who could chat about football, drink beer, and chill like any of their guy friends could. But chat never went beyond football; it has become the only thing they can relate to me with. Off of the football pitch and out of my sports kit I become a different person, I become a girl, and they can't handle it.

From my ethnographic research I have learned that the gendered divisions of sport in the United Kingdom arise from a long tradition of cultural patriarchy and male dominance. The disparities which characterize the modes and means of male and female athletics are deeply entrenched in the cultural perceptions and societal emulations of feminine and masculine identities. Henceforth, conceptions of femininity do not fit into the British ideas or definitions of sports and athletics. It therefore can be said that British society's inability to reconcile women with sport is the root cause for the projection of masculine traits and characteristics onto female athletes. The encounters which I had during my field work emulate these ideas, and have helped me to understand the social grounds for the gender profiling which my friends and I have experienced whilst participating in sports within Britain.

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