

Perspectives of Women College Athletes on Sport and Gender

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Abstract Although sport access for females has greatly improved, certain behaviors continue to be considered more or less appropriate for females depending upon how compatible they are with biologically or socially constructed female characteristics. However, young women who have grown up playing sports and continue participation at the college level have constructed meanings about being a young woman and an athlete. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed to investigate how seven gymnasts and seven softball players competing in NCAA Division I athletics view and contend with a “female/athlete paradox.” These women recognized preferred femininity and at times constructed images based on this notion. However, they also embraced their athleticism and felt at ease choosing not to perform femininity in some contexts.

Keywords Gender · Sports · Femininity · Stereotypes · Women athletes

Introduction

Throwing like a girl. This simple, yet demeaning phrase speaks volumes about appropriate qualities for males and

females in our society as they relate to sport. Throwing like a girl continues to be widely interpreted as not having the ability to throw proficiently. According to this statement, female sporting ability exists at a much lower level than male ability. From this perspective, girls and women who have sporting ability or can throw would be viewed as unusual or possessing male-like qualities. Equally as suspect would be males who are not proficient in sport, as they are compared to girls—this comparison being meant as an insult to males. However, girls and women do play sports—all types of sports—and many women continue their sports participation to reach high levels of competition. Understanding the experiences of women athletes who reach the top levels in a sport environment that is still largely associated with males and masculinity is an important area of inquiry.

This research sought to explore how college women athletes who currently participate in sport at a high level view being female and being an athlete. More specifically, we wanted to discover if these women athletes understood the condition of being a female athlete as incompatible, or in conflict. To better understand how women athletes negotiate the present day sport environment and to discover their attitudes about the sport context, it was necessary to center an analysis on the experiences of individuals. To best address the research question, Dewar’s (1993) caution against trying to isolate a generic woman in sport was considered. Rather than attempting to present an image of a “woman athlete,” we sought to understand lived experiences of women athletes by soliciting personal meanings. We designed a qualitative interviewing study, with the understanding that the researcher cannot solely rely on his or her assumptions, but must also actively solicit ideas and themes from interviewees (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Interviews lend themselves to mutual creation of knowledge and

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allow interpretive understandings of the participants' meanings. Thus, the researcher has a responsibility to develop concepts and categories, compare and contrast themes and concepts, and ultimately put together the information they find to form explanations and theories that are grounded in the details, evidence and examples of the interviews (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

Many girls and women currently participating in sport at the high school and intercollegiate level were born well after Title IX banned sex discrimination in educational settings in 1972, and most have had a number of opportunities to participate in sports. Understandably, today's female athletes do not see their sport experiences through the same lens as the women who realized the impact of Title IX first-hand—those who may have struggled for facilities, opportunities and legitimacy as athletes. With female sport participation numbers currently at an all time high (Acosta and Carpenter 2006), it might be assumed that sport environments are now more inclusive. Proponents of equal opportunity for women in sport hoped that new opportunities would also trigger a dramatic shift in cultural values regarding women's sport. However, according to Sabo and Messner (1993), this has not necessarily been the case. They noted a paradoxical situation in sports where girls and women are admitted to the realm of sport, but continue to be discriminated against. Clasen (2001) suggested that simply increasing the numbers and finances has not changed the overall environment of sports, while Hargreaves (1994) further stated that while women may be approaching equalization of opportunity (Acosta and Carpenter 1985, 2004, 2006), they are typically making these gains without upsetting the order of society that embraces existing traditions and male dominance.

Sport has been found to reinforce a power differential based on gender that is not only favorable to males, but may also be constraining toward females (Henderson et al. 1996; Shaw 1994). Clasen (2001) discussed the inconsistency of being both a female and an athlete, arguing that the label 'female athlete' is a paradox grounded in traditional dualisms of Western culture. According to Clasen, all significant dualisms tend to be hierarchical, and male and masculine traits are typically defined as better than female and feminine characteristics. Clasen acknowledges American culture commonly accepts a male/female binary thus, "the inability to exist in multiple poles ultimately leads to paradoxical injunctions" (p. 37).

Women athletes who are skilled and forceful subjects, and who embody power, challenge the equation of physical power with masculinity (Whitson 1994). The potential gender conflict within female sport necessitates a need for research into the experiences of those elite women athletes whose participation is based on what some would describe as the male model of sport (Hargreaves 1994; Theberge

1994). Given the number of women with the capacity and desire to participate in sport, one may question why a paradox of athleticism and femininity continues to exist, what purpose it serves, and to what extent it is being resisted by the female athletes. Women athletes have persisted in a male dominated environment, and have gained sport competence through their continued participation. Their mere presence in high-level competitive sport seems to indicate some command over, or disassociation with, the paradox of athleticism and femininity. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate how high-level college women athletes view and contend with what we present as a potential "female/athlete paradox." The theoretical framework for the study has its foundation in feminist epistemology. We presume that popular conceptions of gender impact the sport context, and appreciate that knowledge may be gained through a deeper understanding of the insider's perspective possessed by college women athletes. We also acknowledge the performative aspect of gender (Butler 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987) and hope to understand how women athletes construct gender in different contexts. Utilizing a qualitative methodology to address the research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with women athletes who were current participants in gymnastics and softball at the NCAA Division I level.

Sport as a Male Domain

Sport as a male domain has been strongly supported in the literature (Anderson 2005; Birrell and Theberge 1994; Bryson 1987; Cszima et al. 1988; Hargreaves 1986; Messner 1988, 2002; Messner and Sabo 1990; Snyder and Spreitzer 1983). For males, sport participation is considered "natural" and is often strongly encouraged by significant others such as parents and peers (Messner 1998). From childhood, males are taught that successful competition is a key route to prestige and self-esteem (Messner and Sabo 1990). Through sports participation, males potentially have the opportunity to experience social acceptance and learn what is expected of them to fulfill their social roles.

Early studies by Coleman (1961) examined the values of high school students to analyze how the structure of the adolescent subculture established standards for social acceptance. Coleman surveyed high school students and asked them how they would like to be remembered. He found that participating in athletics was the most important predictor of popularity for males, with 44% of boys choosing that they would like to be remembered as an athletic star. At the time this research was conducted, participation opportunities for female athletes were extremely limited, and the role of "athletic star" was not

presented as an option for girls to choose. Rather, Coleman substituted “being a leader in activities” for “athletic star” when presenting potential remembrance roles to high school girls. In fact, girls did choose to want to be remembered as a leader in activities most often (37%), followed by the role of most popular (34%).

A number of studies have replicated Coleman’s (1961) work. However, contemporary studies recognized an increase in female sport opportunities since Coleman’s original data collection in the late-1950s and were no longer compelled to substitute the remembrance role of “leader in activities” for “athletic star” for girls (Goldberg and Chandler 1989, 1991; Holland and Andre 1994, 1999; Kane 1988). Rather, identical remembrance roles used for males and females included brilliant student, most popular, athletic star, and leader in activities. Despite more female participation in athletics, a majority of male adolescents continued to want to be remembered as athletes while most females wanted to be remembered as leaders in activities and brilliant students. Goldberg and Chandler (1989) discovered that half of the males rated the role of “outstanding athlete” as important or very important, while only the role of “outstanding student” was rated as important or very important by the majority of females. The value that boys have placed on being an athletic star supports the notion that preferred maleness is widely associated with sport (Bryson 1987). Furthermore, sport is a context that rewards male participation. Schell and Rodriguez (2000) explained sport to be “a product of culture, and a reflection of the ideologies of dominant values and ideals, as portrayed in what sport means, how play is structured, who may participate, and notions of ideal athletes” (p. 15).

Masculine Hegemony in Sport

Anderson (2005) relied on Gramsci’s (1971) original definition of hegemony in explaining a “particular form of dominance in which a ruling class legitimates its position and secures the acceptance—if not outright support—from those classes below them” (p. 21). Anderson (2005) further explained that the key element to hegemony is that complicity is achieved because subordinates believe their place in the system is *right* and *natural*. Thus, the ideology that guides the collective thinking of a culture is reproduced to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others (Theberge and Birrell 1994). Sport is one such context that has been identified for its reflection and reproduction of the attitudes, beliefs, rituals, and values of society (Birrell and Cole 1994; Hargreaves 1986; Kane and Snyder 1989; Koivula 2001; Messner 1988, 2002). This prevailing ideology legitimizes differential power, and as such, it distorts the conditions in which people live (Theberge 1987).

Since sport has been regarded as a social institution that maintains and reproduces male dominance and female subordination (Birrell 1988; Hargreaves 1986; Lenskyj 1986; Theberge 1987; Willis 1982), beliefs regarding the biological and physical superiority of males in sport may be linked to male power, privilege and domination in the larger society (Clarke and Clarke 1982; Sabo 1985; Theberge 1985; Willis 1982). Connell (1990) stated that the dominant ruling groups within the institution of organized sports were largely responsible for defining and reinforcing a masculine ideology. Values and ideologies that exist within sport reinforce traits associated with masculinity, such as competition, aggression, toughness and elements of traditional understandings of the sporting male (Sabo 1985; Wellard 2002).

Hargreaves (1986) supported that sport practices reinforce gender inequities that exist in a male dominated culture. However, it appears that females have not been the only victims of the high degree of masculinity reinforced and rewarded through sport participation. The patriarchal nature of sport has the potential to harm and limit both women and men (Kidd 1990). While athletic prowess, as a sign of masculinity in men, can be an instrument of patriarchal power relations and privilege (Pronger 1990), Hargreaves (1991) found the aggressive displays of masculinity expected of men in sport forced them to subdue their sensitivities and, in essence, makes men the victims of a society that attaches importance to masculinity. Further, Connell (1995) recognized different forms of masculinity, and relations of domination and subordination constructed through social practices. Thus, it appears that the men who define the culturally defined standards of masculinity are viewed more positively than are those men considered less masculine. Though all men are affected by the expectations in sport that reinforce masculine hegemony, some simply live up to these gender-role expectations better than do others. Schell and Rodriguez (2000) maintained that in sport, as in the larger society, “systems of inequality and exclusion exist as effects of a dominant group ideology of an elite minority who control the major factions of sport: economic, political, and cultural” (p. 19). Certain males retain control of sport, and provide the context and discourses that impact and regulate participation for all involved. In particular, Schell and Rodriguez identified the media, the governing structure of sport, and the socialization process as ways in which societal values and norms are regulated by dominant groups and conveyed to subordinates. In sport, then, teachings that reinforce patriarchal values and exaggerate gender differences oppress women and a great number of men (Sabo 1985). Although the focus of this paper is on women in sport, we do recognize the implications that dominant ideologies have on both women and men in this context.

Theberge and Birrell (1994) asserted that hegemony is never complete and can be contested. According to Hargreaves (1986), discrimination, as an outgrowth of hegemony, must be reexamined and challenged. Because hegemony requires consent for domination by the subordinate groups, it makes sense that *the way it is*, is not *the way it has to be*, and relationships can change. If, despite cultural and structural changes, sport has continued to “belong to men” (Birrell and Theberge 1994; Bryson 1987; Hargreaves 1986; Lenskyj 1990; Messner 1988, 1990, 1998; Messner and Sabo 1990; Snyder and Spreitzer 1983), the need for further investigation regarding sport for women is evident. Understanding the changing culture and the quest for legitimacy within the realm of female sport is a challenge that prompts one to move beyond a reliance on past perspectives that viewed women simply as the oppressed. Hall (1996) asserted a continued need to focus on sport as a site for relations of domination and subordination, but also maintained that sport serves as a site of resistance and transformation. In recognizing the socially defined standards established for men and women in our society, Dewar (1993) advocated looking at the meanings and experiences of individual women in sport while asking why popular attitudes support difference and sexual oppression. Dewar noted that women who do succeed in sport create a resistance to representations of women’s physiological and psychological subordination.

Gender Appropriateness in Sport

The construction of gender defines normative boundaries and “influences how we think of ourselves and others, how we relate to others, and how social life is organized at all levels...” (Roth and Basow 2004, p. 263). Duncan (1990) maintained that the social construction of gender as well as the dualistic constructs of masculinity and femininity, embrace traditional stereotypes of men and women. The assumption that men and women fit into bipolar categories reinforces biological constructions of gender and an oppositional binary related to physical performance (Kane 1995). These limiting definitions of gender assume that men are physically superior, while women are weaker, leading to a recognition of males as more natural or respected athletes (Castelnuovo and Guthrie 1998; Kane 1995). Although deeply entrenched in our society, beliefs regarding gender are not static. Being culturally and socially induced, collective notions of gender are subject to drastic change over time (Visser 1996), and as roles shift in our society gender stereotypes should as well (Diekmann and Eagly 2000).

Former professional athlete and author, Mariah Burton Nelson (1998, March), defined the problematic intersection

of females and sport in an article entitled, “I won, I’m sorry” that appeared in *Self* magazine.

How can you win if you’re female? Can you just do it? No. You have to play the femininity game. Femininity by definition is not large, not imposing, not competitive. Feminine women are not ruthless, not aggressive, not victorious. It’s not feminine to have a killer instinct, to want with all your heart and soul to win—neither tennis matches nor elected office nor feminist victories such as abortion rights. It’s not feminine to know exactly what you want, then go for it. Femininity is about appearing beautiful and vulnerable and small. It’s about winning male approval. (Nelson 1998, p. 145)

Nelson (1998) expressed chagrin in her observations of divergent expectations for males and females. Her constrained definition of femininity closely aligns with Coakley’s (2004) description of a two-category gender classification system in American culture that relies on biological sex categories as central to the way many people see the world.

West and Zimmerman (1991) spoke of “doing gender” and proposed that once differences have been constructed based on sex categories, an individual may continually establish this category based on displays which are socially appropriate for his or her gender. For example, one is born into a sex category, and then may continually establish this category by doing gender through displays of dress, hairstyle, and other behaviors that are consistent with being male or female. Crossett (1995) explained that doing gender is a continual social process that is constantly being negotiated on a conscious and unconscious level. Not only do we do gender, we read how others do it and gain an ongoing understanding of appropriateness. Crossett explained that, “Once gender distinctions become institutionalized, they support the ‘naturalness’ of gender behavior that is specific to each sex” (p. 84).

Considerable research has focused on consensual perceptions of gender behavior and appearance to determine the appropriateness of particular styles of athletic participation (Cszima et al. 1988; Hall et al. 1991; Kane 1987; Koivula 1995, 2001; Matteo 1986; Metheny 1965; Messner and Sabo 1990). Metheny (1965) was among the first to identify gender stereotypes that influence the social acceptability of various sports. This early research recognized that sports requiring aesthetically pleasing movement patterns, use of a manufactured device to facilitate movement, use of a light object, and a spatial barrier separating one from an opponent would be acceptable for women. Alternately, an attempt to physically subdue an opponent, use of force, overcoming resistance of a heavy object, and bodily contact in sport would be perceived as acceptable for men, and therefore

unacceptable for women (Metheny 1965). Matteo (1986, 1988) and Cszima et al. (1988) proposed the notion that sports are classified as masculine and feminine, while Kane and Snyder (1989) found that the degree of physicality necessary in a given sport determines if that sport is thought of as “typically male” or “typically female.” Cahn (1994) faulted the literature that distinguished feminine sports based on aesthetic beauty versus strength (e.g., Matteo 1988; Metheny 1965), asserting these experts have “fortified a set of problematic cultural links between femininity, beauty, and female athleticism” (p. 224). Cahn (1994) accepted that all sports contain an aesthetic dimension, and assumed the prevailing emphasis on sports for women that do not demand violence, aggression, and exhaustion has limited women’s sport participation.

A number of studies that built upon Metheny’s (1965) original framework have, however, determined that some sports are more acceptable for women (Colley et al. 1987; Koivula 1995, 2001; McCallister et al. 2003; Snyder and Spreitzer 1983). Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) surveyed adults to identify their perceptions of appropriateness concerning women’s sport participation. Respondents indicated that they found basketball, track and softball to detract from feminine qualities, while swimming, tennis and gymnastics enhanced feminine qualities. Similarly, Colley et al. (1987) found a sex-appropriate ranking schema in sport that suggests individual sports (i.e., tennis, figure skating, golf, and gymnastics) are more appropriate for women than team sports. Koivula (1995) asked a sample of Swedish university students to attach gender labels to 41 sports. Nineteen sports were labeled as gender neutral, 7 as feminine, and 15 as masculine. Koivula (2001) subsequently analyzed sports using 12 factor-based scales and recognized that sports labeled as feminine were attributed factors such as aesthetic beauty, grace, femininity, and womanly. In contrast, sports labeled as masculine were attributed factors of danger/risk and violence, team spirit, speed, strength and endurance, and masculinity. She concluded that men’s sports emphasized competition through a war-like structure, while women’s sports were rooted in philosophies of participation, cooperation and play.

Kane’s (1987) inquiry into gender stereotyping and the perceived attractiveness of female athletes found evidence that sport type influenced the respondent’s perceptions of attractiveness. Judging women athletes based on facial photographs and type of sport activity Kane (1987) found that female athletes in sex-appropriate sports were perceived to be more attractive than athletes in sex-inappropriate sports, and their non-athlete peers. When a female athlete’s picture was matched with the sex-appropriate sport of volleyball, the mean attractiveness ratings were significantly higher than when the same picture was matched with the sex-inappropriate sport of football. Additionally, Gillen

(1981) found that ratings of physical attractiveness increased for female athletes perceived as extremely feminine and male athletes perceived as extremely masculine.

In an examination of the relationship between female athletic participation and status attainment, Kane (1988) found that high school students attributed significantly greater social status to females in sex-appropriate sports (such as tennis, volleyball and golf) than those in sex-inappropriate sports (such as basketball and softball). Kane (1988) concluded that “social assessments made about female sport participation within high school status systems remain heavily influenced by traditional beliefs regarding feminine, ladylike behavior” (p. 23). Consistent with Kane’s results, Holland and Andre (1994) concluded that females who participated in sex-appropriate sports were clearly preferred by their peers compared to females who participated in sex-inappropriate sports. The researchers alleged that when examining traditional roles “a greater role conflict for female athletes would be expected to occur among participants in sex-inappropriate sports, such as basketball or softball, because this participation presents a greater departure from traditional feminine expectations than does participation in sex-appropriate sports” (Holland and Andre 1994, p. 405).

In a more recent study seeking to identify perceptions of female and male athletes, McCallister et al. (2003) interviewed girls in elementary school and asked about perceived capabilities of boys and girls. Boys were commonly perceived as being tough, while girls were more often seen as fragile. Specific sport activities were also frequently identified with boys, such as football, soccer, baseball, kickball, hockey, basketball, and wrestling. Sports and activities that girls were considered best at included jump rope, softball, cheerleading, dance, ballet, and gymnastics. The interviewers also asked for interpretations of the phrase “throwing like a girl.” They reported that an overwhelming number of girls had heard the phrase and the overall consensus was that the phrase was most often directed toward boys and was meant to be a “put down.” Additionally, most girls assumed that the comment “throwing like a boy” directed toward girls was a compliment (McCallister et al. 2003).

Despite suggestions that gender categories will break down and continue to blur in a postmodern society (Firat 1994), Laberge and Albert (1999) conceptualized sport as a structure ordered according to a dualistic understanding of gender that may continue to constrain sport participation for girls and women to varying degrees (Hargreaves 1993; Krane 2001; Krane et al. 2004; McCallister et al. 2003; Shaw 1994). Hargreaves (1994) deemed it particularly difficult to transcend traditional assumptions that feminine and masculine-appropriate sports “are in the ‘natural’ order of things” (p. 7). McGinnis et al. (2003) found evidence of

liberation resulting in women's increased ability to participate in sport through legislated opportunity, yet argued that further liberation will only occur with freer access to move in between different activities without regard to gender. Krane et al. (2004) proposed that in "living the paradox" (p. 315) of being both a female and athlete must be negotiated by girls and women who participate in sport.

Method

The merits of qualitative interviewing are articulated well by Rubin and Rubin (1995) who stated, "Qualitative interviewing is both an academic and practical tool. It allows us to share the world of others to find out what is going on, why people do what they do, and how they understand their worlds. With such knowledge you can help solve a variety of problems" (p. 5).

Sample

The participants in this project consisted of 14 collegiate women athletes (7 gymnasts and 7 softball players) between the ages of 18 and 22, who take part in Division I intercollegiate sports at a large university in the Midwestern United States. These elite sportswomen are talented athletes with a long history of participation in their sport, who currently excel at the highest level of intercollegiate athletics. To do so, they spend a great deal of time training, competing and traveling to represent the university as an athlete. They are also full-time students.

The gymnasts in the study were from various hometowns throughout the United States, and one was Canadian. Information obtained from their media guide reported the women represented all classes, from freshman to senior. The gymnasts specialized in their sport from a very young age, and most were members of elite club teams. Four of the women reported participating in gymnastics since the age of three, and two others began when they were 5-years-

old. This information was not available for one of the women (see Table 1 for a brief profile of the gymnasts).

The softball athletes were from various regions of the United States representing freshman, sophomore and junior classes. Six women on the team appeared to be Caucasian, with one individual identifying herself as Mexican-American. The softball players tended to play more sports throughout high school than did the gymnasts, but made a considerable commitment to softball, with many attending camps and clinics and playing softball year-round. The softball players were larger and taller women than the gymnasts (see Table 2 for a brief profile of the softball players).

Despite a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, the women shared a commonality of competing as athletes at the college level. Regardless of individual differences and distinct requirements of softball and gymnastics, the women's status as high level college athletes sets them apart from other women who are not as immersed in the sport context. As high-level sport participants, the women athletes in the study established a unique set of perspectives, opinions and meanings related to their existence as competent sportswomen. Understanding how these women conceptualize femininity and portray gender inside and outside of sport will provide understandings about the evolving nature of women's participation in sport.

Procedures

Conversational partners (Rubin and Rubin 1995) were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy. Through a criterion sampling option I chose subjects based on their particular status as elite college women athletes. The subjects in my study were chosen based on their status as women undergraduate student-athletes who participated in intercollegiate softball and gymnastics. I sought to interview women in these specific sports, that have been attributed dissimilar levels of gender appropriateness, in an attempt to identify patterns or diverging perspectives.

Table 1 Gymnast profiles.

Athlete	Height	Year in school	Consider self a tomboy?	How feminine?	
				Compared to teammates	Compared to women students
Holly	5'3"	Senior	No	Much more	Similar
Isabel	5'3"	Freshman	Yes	A bit more	Less
Jessica	5'4"	Senior	Yes	Much less	Much less
Kaley	5'8"	Sophomore	No	Average	Less
Leah	5'4"	Junior	Yes	Average	Much less
Meredith	5'3"	Sophomore	No	Average	Similar
Naomi	5'4"	Junior	No	Average	Less

Table 2 Softball profiles.

Athlete	Height	Year in school	Consider self a tomboy?	How feminine?	
				Compared to teammates	Compared to women students
Allison	5'10"	Freshman	Yes	A bit more	Less
Becky	5'7"	Freshman	Yes	A bit more	Less
Cassie	5'11"	Junior	Yes	Average	Much less
Diane	5'7"	Junior	Yes	Just below average	Much less
Eden	5'7"	Sophomore	No	More	Similar
Fiona	5'7"	Sophomore	Yes	More	Less
Gina	5'3"	Freshman	Yes	Average	Less

Burgess (1991) discussed the importance of gaining access, or permission to conduct research in a particular social setting. Access to a research setting sometimes is controlled by gatekeepers who have the power to withhold information from researchers or grant permission to conduct a research study (Taylor and Bogdan 1984). Adler and Adler (1991) recognized intercollegiate athletics to be an institutionally lodged group with an extreme sensitivity to the insider–outsider distinction. One of the researcher's status as a former athlete and athletic administrator facilitated entry into an environment that is often very guarded. This researcher contacted the head coaches of the gymnastics and softball teams by telephone and email to determine if they would be interested in assisting with the research. The gymnastics coach was extremely supportive, agreeing to introduce the researchers to the athletes at a practice and provide e-mail addresses for each woman. The softball coach did not respond to phone calls or e-mails. A former softball athlete who had recently completed her eligibility was then asked to assist in this research. She e-mailed her former teammates to inform them that they would be contacted by a researcher whom they could trust. Once we secured e-mail addresses for the athletes, they were sent a message explaining that we wished to understand their views on what is was like to be a present day female athlete. The seven softball players and seven gymnasts who responded were each contacted and scheduled for an interview.

We developed the framework of the study through a reliance on sensitizing concepts (Denzin 1978) that provided a structure from which to examine the topic. Blumer (1969) described sensitizing or orienting concepts as providing the researcher with, "...a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look" (p. 148). These sensitizing concepts gave us an idea of what to look for, and what questions to ask.

In this research, an interview guide (Appendix) insured that the same general areas of information were presented

to each interviewee. Questions solicited information on personal definitions of femininity, stereotypes, and appraisal of the behaviors of themselves and others. We sought to treat the interviewees as equals in the mutual creation of knowledge rather than objects of research. It is important to recognize that the views each of these partners hold are as legitimate as those conducting the research (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Interview transcripts are quoted frequently in this paper to accurately represent the athletes' perspectives. Perceptions held by women athletes were sought with an understanding that multiple realities exist. However, athletes in gymnastics and softball were purposely chosen for this study based on previously identified differences; gymnastics has been viewed as an aesthetically pleasing and socially appropriate sport for girls and women, while softball has not gained this level of acceptance (Colley et al. 1987; Koivula 1995, 2001; McCallister et al. 2003). Once e-mail addresses were secured for the athletes, they were sent a message explaining the study and soliciting their participation. Athletes who responded were asked to be interviewed. Individual interviews took place in a private room in the student-athlete academic building and lasted approximately one hour.

Prior to the interview, each participant was provided with a consent form and the objectives of the research were explained. Each woman was assured that her identity would remain confidential, thus each athlete was assigned a pseudonym. All interviewees agreed to have the conversation tape recorded, and were willing to be contacted if clarification was necessary. We conducted member checks (Lincoln and Guba 1985) by allowing each participant to review her transcribed interview before an analysis was conducted.

Data Analysis

Advocating a grounded theory approach, Glaser (2002) stated that "a correct interpretation of the data relies on the perspective of the participant to not only tell the researcher what is going on, but to tell the researcher how to view it

from the perspective of the participant” (p. 2). In other words, grounded theory is grounded in the details, evidence, and examples of interviews, based on exchanges in which interviewees can talk back, clarify and explain points (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Daly (1997) stated that theory does not emerge from the data, rather it emerges from the researchers, and that it is drawn out from the data. Thus, grounded theory is “an iterative process by which the analyst becomes grounded in the data and develops increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works” (Ryan and Bernard 2000, p. 783). As interviews were conducted and transcribed, coding of the data was undertaken by the researchers, utilizing constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Transcripts were read and re-read by the researchers and broad classifications emerged. Both researchers compared and discussed categories, and together grouped quotations as they related to the research question, which led to the discovery of patterns and specific themes, some that promoted exciting shifts in perspective and challenged initial assumptions.

Results and Discussion

Themes that emerged from this study will be grouped and presented utilizing quotations from the women athletes who were interviewed. These themes relate directly to the goals of this research, which sought to examine the views of intercollegiate softball players and gymnasts on the potential paradox of being a woman athlete. This study also aimed to discover how women athletes negotiate the present day sport environment.

Perceptions of Gender Constructions

While certain women focused on appearance as an important aspect in defining femininity, others relied more intently on specific behaviors. Several women used the term “girly” in their depictions of feminine and some focused primarily on a preoccupation with beauty, fashion, body type and make-up. Five gymnasts and three softball players specifically identified “cheerleaders,” “models,” or “sorority girls” as examples of feminine women who take an interest in their appearance on a daily basis, regardless of the arena. Diane, a softball athlete, classified a feminine prototype as the “cheerleader type” who focuses on appearance including “...wearing make-up all the time and (having) longer hair and that sort of thing.” Leah, another softball athlete, described a feminine woman as, “Very girly...with nails on and lipstick, (who is) probably like a cheerleader...like, really happy and peppy and that kind of stuff.” Kaley, a gymnast, also recognized that women who

are feminine “stereotypically tend to pay more attention to how they look and care more about their appearance.” Naomi, also a gymnast, stated how one could recognize a feminine woman, sharing, “Probably, like appearance wise, like somewhat slender, I don’t know, let’s see, um, made up, like hair, make-up, I don’t know... like always dressed nice.”

Some specific behaviors were thought to be more common or more appropriate based upon the sex of the person. Diane, a softball player, admitted that in defining feminine, she thought of stereotypes about “the girly way of doing things.” She used her mom, who is not athletic, as an example, describing her as “weaker and slower” and mentioned her mom’s incompetence in throwing a ball (again defining the adage “to throw like a girl”), describing it as “more of a feminine throw than like a masculine throw.”

Gymnasts, Kaley and Naomi, disassociated aggression with femininity. Kaley thought individuals who portrayed “very aggressive behavior” would not be considered feminine. Naomi further described a feminine individual as someone who is “probably more passive, like, I don’t think of the stereotypical, or stereotype of femininity to be really aggressive. Um, maybe, overall, maybe a nice person. I would think.”

Meredith, a gymnast, again contrasted feminine with masculine, supporting the idea of duality. She recognized that her definitions were influenced by stereotypes, but was unable to avoid using this common depiction. Meredith viewed masculine as largely the opposite of feminine, and included both behaviors and physical features in her description:

You’d think that the more feminine person would be someone who, I guess is a little bit weaker. I guess if you’re talking stereotypes... a little bit weaker, a little bit more unsure of themselves. Masculine would be more, I guess from a physical standpoint, I would say, more, like muscular, more of like a presence, more, I guess, stereotypically more confidence.

Body structure, comportment, appearance and behaviors were mentioned by gymnasts and softball players who maintained that women who were not athletes were more often considered feminine. A softball player, Allison, stated, “I think stereotypically it’s just like maybe girls who can’t play sports are just kind of...I don’t know...like kind of the prissy type and concerned about looks and stuff.” Jessica, a gymnast, also supported this notion, stating, “When I think of feminine, I think of like, their muscles. Their arms are just like soft, I guess.”

As elite athletes, the women in this study have persisted in an environment associated with male competence and prestige (Coakley and Donnelly 1999; Sabo 1985). Although all of the athletes interviewed for this study were

born well after the passage of Title IX in 1972, their views about gender were often consistent with earlier work. They described gender as a dualistic notion that results in perceptions of sport appropriateness and constrains women seeking athletic competence. There was also evidence that the women perceived traditional femininity as constraining, and accepted that not all women fit into this very specific category.

Resisting Traditional Definitions of Femininity

While the athletes did not consistently view gender as variable and fluid (Butler 1993), a desire to deconstruct gender was evident in the dissatisfaction eleven of the women expressed over their definitions that relied on stereotypes. Stereotypes the women sought to reject were often based on traditional definitions that portrayed women as inferior. Naomi, a gymnast, was one of the most passionate about her displeasure with stereotyped perceptions of women and spoke of wanting to “fight” and “question” the negative images she thought were commonly associated with femininity. When I continued my inquiry into what is masculine and feminine, Naomi disclosed:

I hate saying it because it's such a stereotype, but I would say (someone who is not feminine is) maybe more aggressive, more outspoken maybe, I really don't like saying it, but maybe intelligence is...I feel like this isn't me so much as what I've grown up with.

She recognized the influence of magazines such as “*Cosmopolitan*,” that, “try and give you, like, the ideal, like stereotype of how you should look if you're a female...” Naomi and another athlete, Cassie, clearly articulated that they thought “feminine” could incorporate a wider range of traits than gender stereotypes allow. Cassie, a softball player, shared:

My mom, like worked all the time, you know and everything. So like my idea of what's feminine is like, somebody who can, like, somebody like my mom who can manage a career and a family. And at the same time can have time for fun. And like don't have to dress up all the time, don't have to sit there and look good to impress somebody else, but they know that they can impress that person with who they are and not what they look like on the outside.

Isabel attempted to work through the inadequacy of linking stereotypes to her definition of femininity. Although she clearly connected femininity to appearance, she admitted that femininity goes beyond surface features:

I feel like a woman who wears like big baggy jeans would be considered masculine, more masculine, or

big baggy t-shirts all the time and doesn't really care about what she wears. But sometimes those women are like the most feminine to me because they're like the true women, because they really don't care. It's really, I don't know, confusing to me.

Naomi also maintained that “to be feminine, you can also be female, and not all females are that stereotype.” It appeared that some the women's observations and beliefs contradicted prevalent conceptions of femininity.

Perceptions on Gender Appropriate Sport

In investigating the meanings held by women athletes regarding a paradox of femininity and athleticism, it was necessary to understand how the women viewed sport appropriateness. Metheny presented the notion of sport appropriateness in 1965, which was well before Title IX, and at a time when women's sport experiences were very different from the 21st century women athletes. However, despite participating in sport 30 years after Title IX, four gymnasts and three softball players readily identified certain sports that were more considered appropriate for men or women. Three of the gymnasts and five of the softball athletes viewed themselves as tomboys and credited their athletic success to this image. Notions of sport appropriateness, even 40 years after Metheny's (1965) study, remain linked to traditional femininity and are present in some of the athletes' definitions and understandings.

Sports demanding aggression and bodily contact were strongly associated with males by the women in this study. Kaley, a gymnast, recognized, “definitely, there's some sports where females are more likely to participate in. Males are more likely to do like football and the more contact sports.” Softball player, Allison identified sports that she thought were less appropriate for females:

I think it's kind of weird... like wrestling, when girls do that, or even like football. I think if you're good at something and you want to do it, it's fine. The thing about the whole wrestling thing is I knew a girl...well, I didn't know a girl but there was a girl in our conference that was a wrestler. And it was just kind of weird to me that she'd go out there and wrestle with guys. I don't know...I just think that's kind of weird.

Another sport Allison thought was “fine” but did not associate with female participation was rugby. Even when women play against one another, she thought it was an odd sport for women:

I think it's a hard-core contact sport. It's weird to see, like, girls out there clobbering girls to the ground with no pads on or anything... a tough sport to play. I've

never played, and just by looking it looks like it would hurt, without any pads or anything.

In addition to especially aggressive sports that demand a good deal of contact, another sport disassociated with female participation was that of bodybuilding. Again, Allison seemed to respect women with athletic competency, but viewed bodybuilding as incompatible for women:

If you're good at it, that's fine but I think it's kind of... When girls... When you're an athlete you lift weights so you get strong and you have muscle definition. But people who body build and have these huge muscles... I don't know. It kind of grosses me out.

Isabel, a gymnast, also mentioned bodybuilding as a sport that remains outside the boundaries of appropriateness for females. She confirmed, "I feel like women who are bodybuilders are definitely not feminine. They are more masculine, they're more into, like weightlifting and like the men." Isabel specifically identified an extremely muscular body build as less feminine. In addition to musculature, she identified height as an example of an extreme body structure, sharing that sometimes, an exceptionally tall woman may not be viewed as particularly feminine, "because men are taller, and women generally aren't exactly tall."

When asked if some sports are associated more with female participation, Becky, a softball player, thought that cheerleading was exceptionally feminine, but wasn't sure that it was a sport. She paused, and seemed to struggle a bit, but identified volleyball and swimming as potentially being more feminine though she wasn't sure why she thought this way. She did recognize her sport of softball as being less feminine, as well as soccer, but again, she couldn't articulate her reasoning. Naomi, a gymnast, thought, "Athletics and some sports even more so, probably, um, are... that don't fit... Like girls in some sports maybe don't fit the stereotype of like femininity." She did not seem particularly comfortable in stating that athletes in some sports are more feminine than others, but shared what she thought may be an overall consensus:

I think just more so from being here (at her university), and like you know, talking to different people, they tell me, and I think basketball, and like soccer, and softball are the ones that really stand out in my mind as to being the more, like girls aren't as feminine as, I don't know, other sports, or other girls.

Meredith, a gymnast, felt that she and her gymnastics teammates appeared to be more feminine than other women athletes:

In general, gymnastics seems to be more feminine, I would say, stereotypically than say softball or basket-

ball, or something. My roommate was a basketball player last year, and just like, it was funny, we got along great, but like the clothes that she would wear, the clothes that I would wear, like, just different things that we would do... it's just a little bit of a different culture, I guess, between sports.

Isabel thought the gymnasts' smaller physiques made it easier for them to be feminine, sharing, "It would be different if we all were, let's say, swimmers, because they have like, you know, broad shoulders..."

Leah, a gymnast, did not associate her sport with being particularly feminine, despite prior research findings identifying women's gymnastics as a gender appropriate sport. Although other athletes in the study viewed gymnasts as feminine, Leah focused on the competencies of the athletes, stating, "I don't think of gymnastics as being girly at all. Like I think that we are strong and we're like... I don't think of any sport as being girly to tell you the truth."

New Visions of Women Athletes

While all of the women could identify activities associated with appropriate feminine behavior, eleven of the athletes seemed uncomfortable doing so. Some were more interested in discussing the present sporting environment that they viewed as more accepting of women athletes. Fiona, a softball player, articulated this sentiment:

I guess that stereotypically you would picture a female as like a cheerleader, because that's what came first, I guess. What we first had. Or gymnasts.... But now I don't think that there's one particular sport, that if you say 'I'm a female athlete' that you would picture that person right away as being in. I think a lot of times when you think of male athletes you think of a basketball player and football player. But, like I don't think there's a stereotypical female athlete that should be qualified as just this or just that. I think if you had asked me this question when female athletics first were coming out, I think you might have been able to pick an ideal sport for females, um, but now that there's so many options and we have unlimited resources and that type of stuff, I don't think it's easy to pick that.

Allison believed stereotypes continue to exist pertaining to femininity and sport participation but noticed that attitudes and opinions toward women's sports have changed and there is now an option for women to play "guy sports." When asked to further explain what a "guy sport" is, Allison expanded:

Well, I think that like it used to be if a girl played a sport, it was like cheerleading or gymnastics or

something where... or pom pom... something that... not taking away from that but like I think that they believed you can't participate in contact sports, or sports that make you sweat. I think that now it's acceptable if a girl wants to go there and play basketball or if a girl wants to go play volleyball or softball, it's more accepted. It's normal now. I think that our society has really changed to where it's acceptable (for a female) to be an athlete and play sports and be in shape.

Naomi, a gymnast from a region of the country where ice hockey is popular, recognized it to be a growing sport for women that has not yet gained wide acceptance. She conveyed a sense of frustration in that hockey is commonly identified as a male sport.

...it was funny, because people down here, I feel like they don't know about, that women's hockey really exists. That organized leagues and sports and stuff. Because like when I'm mentioning, like I went up to Chicago to watch my younger, my high school sister play hockey in a tournament and they're like, 'Girls play hockey?' And this one kid was like, 'I just think of these, like, that's just so weird. I think of girls that play hockey as just huge and really masculine.' And I'm like, 'No they're really not.' I mean, my sister's, you know, pretty similar in appearance to me. And I don't consider myself you know, really masculine or anything.

Each woman understood that developing a muscular body was imperative to achieve athletic success. Dworkin (2001) recognized muscles as a paradox of gender but also identified "new definitions of emphasized femininity that have pushed upward on a glass ceiling of muscularity over time" (p 333). As high-level athletes, the women in the study lift weights to build muscle mass and strength for sport success. They were comfortable being more muscular than other women and understood the necessity of spending quality time in the weight room.

It was clear that the sports of gymnastics and softball require largely different body types as well as divergent talents and proficiencies. In assessing the size of the women in this study (utilizing height information from media guides), the softball athletes were, on average, 4 1/2 in. taller than the gymnasts. Upon visual inspection, it was clear that some softball athletes had considerably larger bodies. Regardless of overall body size, women athletes from both sports placed a major focus on developing their bodies and recognized that they were strong, powerful individuals with muscle definition. The notions the women held concerning their powerful physiques provides insight into contemporary meanings associated with being strong women athletes.

Despite the association of strength, power and muscularity with a masculine identity, every one of the athletes expressed a sense of pride in her powerful body. The women were aware that they were stronger and more muscular than most other women and understood that strength and fitness were requirements for success as college athletes. Diane appreciated her strength and muscles, and experienced support from her teammates regarding their similar physical features. Although she also understood that looking powerful was not a socially accepted norm, she recognized that developing strength would help her team win games and this seemed to be the priority of Diana and her teammates:

I think it's kind of cool actually. We were just lifting in the weight room today and we were all flexing for each other [laughter], showing our muscles... It doesn't really matter too much. I mean I don't want to be this huge, massive girl walking around, but it definitely helps in the sport. It really helps out on the field.

Fiona also recognized that to be an athlete at a high level, developing strength through musculature is necessary. Although she was aware that some women do not want to get extremely muscular, Fiona believed that her teammates also saw the value in being strong:

I don't have a problem with [developing my muscles]. I know like in high school we always had this track runner who absolutely hated doing leg lifts because she did want her body to get bigger, but I'm the type of person who's like [clap] who cares? You know. I mean if you're worried about your legs bulking out then you really have a problem because as an athlete, especially in softball, your legs are like some of your strong tools. Because your legs are key to quick reactions and stuff, so, it's never really bothered me. I've actually enjoyed lifting and enjoyed that aspect of being an athlete.

Cassie, a 5'11" softball player who admittedly has very developed muscles, accepts that being strong is a part of being a successful athlete. Developing her body to be strong and powerful did not happen without some difficulty, as she admitted to having been teased when she was in high school:

... like I always got made fun of by like the preppy people, like the people who sit there and care too much about their image and not anything else... just like little things like, 'you're too muscular,' or 'you're, like manly,' or 'you're all this.' And I'm just like, 'I play a sport.' You know? Like that's how you're supposed to be. And you know, like, I can't be anything else.

Despite having a more traditionally feminine image, the elite gymnasts in the study held viewpoints similar to the softball athletes regarding their strength, power, and muscular bodies. They related a strong body to a better appearance as well as a feeling of competence. Isabel confirmed the notion that to look good, women should have muscles, declaring, “I feel, like, if you’re really thin and don’t have any muscular tone, it just doesn’t look good.” Leah felt the same way, sharing, “I think it’s awesome... having muscles. I don’t like when I see girls and they’re just skinny, scrawny arms. I think it’s cool and people are always like ‘Wow! You guys have like the best arms.’ I think that’s cool.”

Naomi was extremely thoughtful in describing her feelings about being physically strong and muscular from grade school through the present:

I definitely have gone through a few phases of what I’ve thought about it. ...like in grade school up until probably high school years, I, I liked it, like, because I stood out, and I could run fast, I could do 15 pull-ups in gym class for whatever physical fitness testing, and people kind of thought that was neat that I could do that. And then, high school, it, I didn’t, I wasn’t a big fan of being really muscular, because I just, I didn’t really fit in, and those are the kind of years, in high school, you have to try and fit in, and make it work.... So I didn’t really like it, I don’t know, it just didn’t seem like feminine. But now I like it, and I’m kind of in a stage where I don’t really care.

Kaley also was not completely comfortable with her strong physique while growing up, but she is now proud of the way she has developed her athletic body, sharing, “I like it [laughs]. Sometimes in high school people would be like, ‘You have man arms’ and say stuff like that.”

Gymnast, Jessica also felt that the muscular body she had developed as an athlete impacted the way she felt about herself and the way others viewed her:

Being, like, fit and like strong makes you confident in general. I mean, for instance, if you’re walking down the street, you’re more confident that someone’s not going to, like, I don’t know, come up to you and like mug you or something because you are physically stronger, and they’re going to be able to see that just from, you know, either the way you walk or like your arms, that you can expose. So, like, I think being physically strong makes me more confident as a person and in my ability to, like, take care of myself...

It is important to note that although the women in the study were clearly fit and strong, none of them seemed to greatly exceed the culturally produced upper limit on muscular strength (Dworkin 2001; Dworkin and Messner

1999). In this respect, they may more closely resemble a new “heterosex” image of women that celebrates a “held back” musculature and defines a new womanhood (Dworkin 2001). Some of their appearances may also be defined by Markula’s (1995) findings that the cultural ideal for women’s bodies advocates “firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin” (p. 424).

“Selective Femininity”

A number of researchers have supported the idea that women athletes overcompensate and emphasize features such as appearance, make-up, dress and actions (Blinde and Taub 1992; Hargreaves 2000, 2001; Krane 2001; Lenskyj 1991, 1994; Rich 1980). This compulsion has been found to be more common in women’s sports that are perceived as traditionally male, thereby most at-risk to receive the stigmatizing label of lesbian (Hargreaves 2000). Krane (2001) explained the tension experienced by sportswomen to be both physically and mentally strong, yet also to maintain an acceptable appearance and conform to the heterosexist norms of society, as “the femininity balancing act” (p. 122). Lenskyj (1994) found that even when women value winning as much as men, they are often encouraged by teachers, coaches and parents to pay attention to their feminine side. Krane (2001) determined that female athletes “perform femininity to protect themselves from prejudice and discrimination” (p. 120).

The women athletes in this study understood the process necessary to construct a feminine appearance and all but one of the athletes shared that they were skilled in creating a traditionally feminine appearance when they felt it necessary. However, the importance placed on appearing traditionally feminine seemed to be influenced most by one’s setting. The gymnasts admitted to being particularly attentive to their appearance for competition, presuming an appropriate appearance may influence the judges’ opinions and ultimately, their scores. Softball players were much less concerned about appearance in competition. Women in both sports did not focus on appearance for practice, admitting the focus in that environment is athletic competence and skill improvement. While the women athletes were proficient in creating a feminine image, they were not compelled to represent themselves in a traditionally feminine way in all environments to compensate for their athletic prowess. Rather, these elite women athletes shared that there were very specific times they chose to create an image consistent with preferred femininity and times they chose otherwise.

Athletes on both teams were not preoccupied with performing femininity on a daily basis. College seemed to be a “set apart” time where appearance was not always important. In fact, four of the gymnasts and three of the softball players disclosed that they were more apt to pay

attention to what they looked like when they were in high school. As college athletes, the women seemed to feel they could forego making a daily effort to portray a feminine appearance. Softball athlete, Diane stated, "...especially now, especially in college I'm at more of an 'I don't really care what people think' kind of stage." Another softball player, Fiona also admitted that, "It's different in college" and when she thinks about her daily appearance, her sentiment is, "Who cares?!"

The two women who did admit to putting effort into their daily appearance did not necessarily create images consistent with preferred, or traditional femininity. Holly, a gymnast shared, "I don't like to present myself as sort of sloppy. I always like, not dress up, but like wear jeans and stuff, so I try to like, come off like that." Softball player Eden revealed, "I'm not the type of girl, that, every single day I get dressed up to go to school.... usually I'll wear, just like cute sweats, you know, and I never wear them with a big ugly baggy shirt, I always wear them with a cute little zip up, or like a fitted shirt. So, yeah, I have my sweats, but they still, I still match." While these women may have been more concerned about appearance than their teammates, jeans and "cute sweats" looked to be the extent of their efforts.

Meredith, a gymnast, assumed that college women athletes differed from the female student population in the effort they put into their daily appearance:

Generally athletes have the stereotype of not ever getting dressed (up). You know, just wearing sweats and just kind of being comfortable. But I would say a lot of regular female students sometimes get all dressed up for class, but I would say, in that respect, they're trying to push their femininity a little more in the classroom than an athlete.

Gymnast, Kaley agreed, "Other college women seem like they care more about how they look, I guess. Like you walk around campus, and they're like dressed up nice and caring about what other people think more." Leah, a gymnast who described her look as "comfy-grungy," said she does not spend time on her appearance "because I know that I have practice in a couple of hours, so why would I dress up just to go get sweaty and have to shower then?" She also had a hard time understanding why a woman would want to attend to her daily appearance on campus:

People get dressed up for class and it's crazy. I mean I'd never...I think I've worn jeans maybe once this year to class. Like I basically roll out of bed and I go to class, and then I go and I see girls who, like, look like they're going to prom or something. Like, 'What are you doing?'

It is interesting to note that in Leah's opinion, wearing jeans constitutes getting dressed-up.

Gymnast, Jessica, admitted that being an athlete gives her the freedom to not worry about her appearance on most days:

I guess if I grew up, like completely different, like not being an athlete I guess I would probably feel like I would need to focus more on [appearance]. But growing up an athlete, it's like, by the time you get home, the time you like go to sleep, you don't really want to do anything. And so, you don't want, you don't really care so much about the way you look. My hair, it's been in a ponytail for like 18 years now. I put my hair down rarely [laughs] so I don't know...

While the women felt comfortable putting little effort into their day-to-day appearance, all but one felt accomplished at constructing a feminine appearance when they felt it necessary. They did not tirelessly perform femininity to compensate for being athletes. Rather, they seemed content in maintaining an athletic image at times while still embracing and promoting a traditional feminine image outside of sport on occasions of their choosing. Isabel summed this up by stating, "I'm like a pretty feminine person. When I need to be. And at the same time I can be really athletic and, you know, sit around in sweat pants and what not." When asked about the phrase, "when I need to be," Isabel explained that she could "pull it off [being feminine] when [she] wanted to, but [she] didn't always need to."

Athletes in both gymnastics and softball spoke of choosing to put a good deal of effort into their appearance when they go out at night or attend a formal function. When the women were going out, either with friends, or on a date, they focused on hair, make-up, accessories, clothing, and for Fiona, a softball player, even "showing some skin." Allison, a softball player described her preparation for a night out, detailing, "I would take a long shower just to relax, and then I would do the hair, do makeup, put nice clothes on..." Meredith, a gymnast, described what it was like when she became a "real" girl, sharing, "When we're going out, we wear real clothes, we do our hair, we do our make-up."

There was little concern among the athletes about daily appearance, and the women admitted to commonly going to class in athletic gear such as sweat pants and t-shirts. This disregarded for appearance in practice and day-to-day settings indicates a disdain for creating a traditionally feminine appearance on a daily basis. Interestingly, the audience that the women prepare for when they are going out at night is likely comprised of the same individuals that they interact with during the day. However, interactions in a social environment appeared to merit a greater focus on appearance by the women athletes. Most women seemed to have opinions similar to Isabel, who believed athletes could be feminine "when (they) need to be." The desire to look

more traditionally feminine seemed to be a calculated decision and was achieved through a very detailed process that changed one's appearance for certain environments.

Conclusion

Throughout this research, a number of discoveries were made regarding meanings the gymnasts and softball players attributed to being a woman and an elite athlete. The women recognized gender dualisms within North American culture that uphold stereotypes that support a female/athlete paradox. While the women in the study could identify displays typically associated with traditional femininity, they also admitted that these descriptors were not wholly compatible with their personal experiences. Since sport participation for women is not aligned with preferred femininity and prescriptive gender roles, many of the athletes seemed to have created their own reality that allows them to view themselves as women who are also serious competitors.

While dualistic notions of gender have been shown to constrain sport participation for girls and women (Hargreaves 1993; Krane 2001; McCallister et al. 2003; Shaw 1994), the women in this study are developing ways to persist and succeed within sport. Blinde and Taub's (1992) exploration of the potential of sport participation to allow women to counter limiting self-perceptions, gain control of their lives and increase their sense of power is relevant in discussing the findings of our study. Despite participating in a sport context that is largely governed by men and where male notions of power prevail, the women athletes' self-acceptance, pride and appreciation of their athletic skill are grounds for optimism. Theberge (1994) confirmed that, "the potential for sport to act as an agent of women's liberation, rather than their oppression, stems mainly from the opportunity that women's sporting activity affords them to experience their bodies as strong and powerful and free from male domination" (p. 191). However, the athletes' admission of the effort they placed on constructing a traditionally feminine image (even if only at chosen times) leads one to wonder if women athletes are continuing to perform according to cultural standards of femininity, which have begun to embrace powerful women, as long as they can still be feminine (Brown 2004).

Lorber (1998) stated "most people...voluntarily go along with their society's prescriptions for those of their gender status because the norms and expectations get built into their sense of worth and identity as a certain kind of human being and because they believe their society's way is the natural way" (p. 20–21). Past research has focused on the apologetic defense as a strategy that allows female athletes to reconcile athleticism and traditional femininity (Festle 1996) by placing an emphasis on preferred femininity. Prior

research has revealed that women athletes often focus on creating an image in concert with preferred femininity (Clasen 2001; Connell 1987, 1995; Festle 1996; Krane 2001; Scraton et al. 1999; Theberge 1997). Perhaps the decisions current women athletes make regarding when to portray a traditionally feminine appearance reflect a contemporary understanding of gender. The women in this study did not make a daily effort to portray an ultra-feminine image in order to compensate for their athletic prowess. They seem to have found an approach that embraces the performance of traditional femininity at times, often in the social sphere (or during competition for the gymnasts), while also feeling at ease in choosing not to emphasize preferred femininity in other contexts. Different gender portrayals that are dependent upon environment may allow elite women athletes to manage the cultural contradiction of female athleticism.

Birrell and Theberge (1989) viewed sport as a space where gender relations that generally favor men are produced, preserved and publicly celebrated. They believe that women's involvement in sport serves as a form of resistance that disturbs male supremacy. Contrary to focuses that use a constraints approach to study women's participation, a resistance perspective is concerned with ways in which women's participation can function to challenge socially constructed and narrowly defined gender role expectations supported by masculine hegemony. Research on involvement has suggested participation in a sport offers girls and women opportunities to resist the dominant discourse on femininity, which emphasize traditional or preferred displays. Gender integration in sport forces society to re-define masculinity and femininity, and this throws into turmoil beliefs regarding gender roles (Markula 1995). The athletes in this study seem to understand traditional definitions, but have also constructed their own definitions of acceptable gender displays in various settings.

Freysinger and Flannery (1992) proposed, "Resistance may exist along a continuum of intentionality and consciousness" (p. 316), but this does not make the act(s) any less important. Shaw's (2001) views on resistance are especially appropriate when focusing on women's sport. Whether intentional or not, Shaw recognized commonalities of women's resistance in that it "involves individual agency in acts that challenge or resist the oppression or constraints experienced in everyday life" (p. 198). It does not appear that the women athletes in this study deliberately sought to be politically active agents of resistance and change. However, their ability to develop themselves as athletes, their navigation of the sport environment, and their desire to de-emphasize traditional femininity (if only at certain times and in particular contexts) may allow them to resist constraining dominant ideologies.

Clearly, there are inequities within the sport context, but merely recognizing that systems of inequality and exclusion exist (Schell and Rodriguez 2000) is not enough. A critique of the literature examining male domination in sport is that it neglects to recognize women as “social actors who perceive and interpret social situations and actively determine, in each setting, how they will respond” (Shaw 1994, p. 15). It is possible that some women athletes may be developing a sense of agency, rather than existing as victims of a patriarchal society. Female athletes who are supported in the sport context, and feel valued as athletes, may be prompted to question gender prescriptions. This raises the question of whether competence and power within sport translates to power and agency outside of sport. It is evident that the women athletes in this study possessed an understanding of gender expectations within sport and society but made some decisions incompatible with prescriptive gender norms.

When examining the results of this research, it is important to acknowledge that those interviewed are some of the most elite female athletes in North America. It would be of interest to understand meanings constructed by other populations, such as female athletes at less elite levels including those in scholastic and recreational leagues. Collecting demographic information, including race, family history, and socio-economic status may also result in important findings. While the meanings these athletes have constructed about their sport participation are not expected to be transferable to other populations, they are important nevertheless. Many girls and women choose to discontinue sport participation, and thus studying those who persist, despite potential constraints, may allow us to shape opinions about the sport context for all women.

Whether we are on the verge of celebrating a new era of sport that embraces women athletes or face a continuation of gender prescriptions that constrain women in sport is yet to be determined. Hall et al. (1991) explained that, “Gender issues in sport are not unlike the struggle over similar issues in the broader society, because ultimately they are struggles over who will have power and who will control, and they do arouse considerable feelings” (Hall et al. 1991, p. 38). Women who stay involved in sport may find ways to overcome, or at least negotiate, gender constraints that impact female sport participation, and this may lead to empowerment and resistance. However, it is necessary to consider whether powerful women athletes adept in constructing a feminine image may be responding to a new cultural expectation of women.

Inness (2004) wondered if a trend of “girl power” that has produced tough female characters in television and film reflects a change in how popular culture depicts women. She posed the questions, “What has happened to make these tough females so popular?” and “Do they represent

greater freedom for women from gender stereotypes?” Finally, she asks, “What do these figures suggest about changing societal roles for women and men?” (p. 2). Comparing these tough heroines, or women warriors, in popular culture to the women who participate in physically demanding sport is compelling. The unique experiences of college women athletes allow them to share meanings that contribute to a deeper level of understanding about the potential inconsistency of being a female athlete, which can address the acknowledge power differential in sport that disadvantages females (Henderson et al. 1996).

These images are evidence of a cultural shift that has created a new vision of womanhood. However, the new acceptance of females as heroines may not be entirely empowering. In looking at images of tough women in popular culture, Brown (2004) stated, “Perhaps the real liberating and stereotype-breaking potential of female characters in action roles is that they can assume positions of power while also being sex symbols” (p. 72). From this perspective, women can only be tough and powerful if they are also feminine, which may draw some comparisons to the condition of women in sport.

More recent presentations of women in elite sport seem to have taken on this new dimension. In a study on media guides at NCAA Division I schools, Buysse and Embser-Herbert (2004) examined cover photos of sport media guides in 1990 and 1997. During both time periods women were more likely to be presented in poses that were not athletic. In 1997, however, they found the category of sexual suggestiveness to be significant. Sexuality also seemed to eclipse athleticism when a number of women Olympic athletes from the 2004 games in Athens revealed their bodies in two men’s magazines. This presentation emphasizes fit bodies as sexy, as long as this fitness does not deviate from a heterosexual norm. The idea that women athletes can be strong, powerful and tough is evidence of changing societal roles. However, being powerful has not replaced being sexy, and while women may be able to celebrate their athleticism, another layer of expectations has been created. Are women athletes able to challenge the equation of physical power with masculinity (Whitson 1994) without having the insight and ability to focus on femininity?

The women athletes in this study appreciate their physical power and all but one seemed to enjoy portraying a feminine appearance on occasions that they choose. It would appear that strategies these women are utilizing to resolve the female/athlete paradox include choosing when they want to portray a feminine ideal, and supporting one another in these decisions. Playing like a (powerful) “girl,” and occasionally looking like one too (in a traditional sense), may define what it means to be a sportswoman at the present time.

Appendix

Interview Guide

1. What does it take to be an athlete at this level?
2. What is feminine?
3. What is not feminine?
4. Do you think there are some stereotypes about what is feminine?
 - a. What are they?
5. Do you think it is important to be feminine?
6. How do you feel about being a woman who is physically strong and muscular?
7. How physically strong are you?
8. Have you ever been treated differently because you were a girl who played sports?
9. What adjectives do you use to describe yourself now?
10. How feminine are you compared to:
 - a. other women athletes?
 - b. women college students?
 - c. team members?
11. Have you ever felt pressure to be more stereotypically feminine?
12. When do you feel most feminine?
 - a. What do you do to make yourself feel this way?
14. Do you do anything to emphasize your femininity:
 - a. in practice?
 - b. for competition?
 - c. outside of practice and competition?

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