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IT'S STILL A MAN'S GAME?

The Experiences of Top-Level European Women Footballers

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Abstract This article investigates national similarities and differences with respect to how women enter the world of football and whether gender relations continue to impact on both their access to and opportunities in the sport. The data comes from 40 semi-structured interviews with top-level women footballers in England, Germany, Norway and Spain. Early male influences are discussed in relation to: existing work on socialization into sport, notions of femininity, and the different cultural contexts. The organization of youth sport is identified as a crucial factor in influencing girls and young women's opportunities to play football. Furthermore, although men continue to have a considerable influence on the women's game, even when women have no conscious intentions of resistance, they incorporate their own meanings into the sport.

Key words • cross-national research • gender • women's football

Sporting Women: From Equity to Diversity

Although change has been slow, the opportunity for women to engage in a range of sports and physical activities has become available throughout Europe, Australasia and North America (Hargreaves, 1994). Women's access to football can be seen as a political outcome of a liberal-feminist discourse that centres on equal opportunities, socialization practices and legal/institutional reform. However, during the past two decades an accurate and well-rehearsed critique of liberalism has emerged, questioning the weakness of the concept of equality in accepting the gender-linked values of mainstream sports while failing to acknowledge or understand broader structures of power. Increasingly, feminist sport sociology has focused on sport as a site for relations of domination and subordination and the reproduction of gendered power relations (Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994). As this critical work on sport has developed, the debate has

moved beyond the early determinist accounts that placed men and women in a straightforward oppositional model of oppressor/oppressed, to questions of resistance, agency and empowerment (Birrell and Therberge, 1994; Gilroy, 1997; Whitson, 1994); men and masculinities (Messner and Sabo, 1990; Nauright and Chandler, 1996); and differences between women in relation to age, class, ethnic identity, sexuality and dis/ability (Dewar, 1993).

More recently, the assault on modernist analyses by postmodern and post-structuralist theorists has further shifted the debate to accounts that focus on gendered identities, subjectivities and female sporting bodies as the sites for contestation and struggle (Cole, 1994; Grosz, 1994). As such, the emphasis appears to have moved back towards analyses of individual women but on very different theoretical terrain to early liberal-feminist discourse. Rather than the essentialism of a 'fixed' identity, gender is cast as an act or performance which is complex, shifting, plural and discursively constructed (Butler, 1990). A fundamental aspect of this shift has been a move away from understanding power as something possessed by certain groups involving relations of domination and subordination, to power defined as 'a dynamic or network of non-centralized forces' (Foucault, 1979: 138). Poststructuralist analyses emphasize sport as an important arena for the disruption of the binary oppositions of masculinity/femininity and the emergence of potentially transgressive forms of sporting femininities (Blinde and Taube, 1992; Halbert, 1997).

The disruption of gender boundaries has been explored most extensively within the context of sporting forms traditionally associated with and defined by hegemonic masculinity such as bodybuilding (Kuhn, 1988; Miller and Penz, 1991; Obel, 1996) and boxing (Halbert, 1997). Normative ideals about female bodies and 'ideal' femininity have become severely disrupted as women have moved into traditionally male-only sports. However, these accounts are not simply about transgression or the blurring of traditional gender boundaries; they also involve evidence of conformity and contradiction as some women appear to comply with certain 'norms' of traditional femininity.

Obel's (1996: 185) research is interesting in that she argues that 'bodybuilding is a challenge to categorical ways of thinking about femininity, masculinity and the body'. Agreeing with Kuhn (1988), she argues that the muscular body of the female bodybuilder disrupts the binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and nature/culture. However, she goes on to differ from Kuhn's 'reading' of bodybuilding in that she views this disruption as not necessarily threatening to the gender order. She bases her arguments on the fact that so many of the analyses of bodybuilding rely on textual analysis or readings made by the researcher, rather than the experiences as articulated by the bodybuilders themselves or the language and practices of competitive body building. Obel (1996: 188) argues that if you shift the focus to the experiences of individual female bodybuilders 'their discourse constitutes masculinity and femininity in opposition'. Drawing on interviews with women bodybuilders, she argues that *their* emphasis is on diffusing the tension between muscularity and what is viewed as 'safe' femininity. These women bodybuilders continue to reassure that women's bodybuilding is compatible with an attractive and acceptable *heterosexual* femininity. Obel's research reflects the tensions that exist between structuralist accounts,

which continue to focus on wider structures of power (hegemonic white, heterosexual masculinity) grounded in material 'realities', and poststructuralism, which emphasizes deconstruction, a sensitivity to a multiplicity of meanings, with gender a 'performance' actively constituted and plural.

Women in Football

Our own research set out to explore some of these theoretical debates, grounding our analysis in empirical data on women's entry into and experiences with football, which is one of the fastest growing sports for women in Europe. In 1996 women's football was played for the first time at the Olympic Games, with the USA defeating China for the gold medal. Women's football continues to grow and flourish with an estimated 20 million players now actively competing around the world (FIFA, 1994). However, there remain some barriers to the development of the women's game. One key obstacle is the association of football with male sport that contains the conventional stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity in western culture. For women to enter the powerfully male-defined and controlled world of football, they have had to challenge dominant notions of 'appropriate' female sport.

Methods

In agreement with other scholars, we stress the importance of qualitative accounts that allow sportswomen to articulate their own feelings about being women who play and enjoy sport (Lenskyj, 1994; Talbot, 1991; Wright and Dewar, 1997; Young, 1997). In addition, we are mindful that discourses around gender must be historically and culturally located. Although we recognize the positive contribution of postmodernism and poststructuralism to our understanding of gender, we remain concerned that many of these accounts reject or ignore structural and cultural contexts. Our research explores 'difference' in relation to individual subjectivities, as well as across national boundaries.

We draw on interview data from a research project which investigated the experiences and meanings of sport in the lives of women in England, Germany, Norway and Spain. As part of the study we conducted 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with top-level footballers in each country. All interviewees played in the highest league in their country, with some having gained national honours. The majority of the English players came from working-class backgrounds and were employed in clerical or service industry jobs; only two had obtained further or higher education qualifications. The German women worked in a range of jobs (banking, painter and decorator, sales) with half having some further education. The Norwegian players came from a range of backgrounds with no clear class location as defined by occupation, educational qualifications, housing or parental background. The players in Spain defined themselves as middle class, with the majority having higher education qualifications. All the players interviewed were white. This reflects the under-representation of black

and minority ethnic women in football in all the countries studied. Their absence from top-level women's football, particularly in Britain (where black male players have made a significant impact over the past decade in top clubs and the national team) is an example of the continued discrimination some black women and women of colour face in many countries in competitive sport (Birrell, 1990; Zaman, 1997).

The interviews were structured around six key themes: sporting biography, social networks, daily life, gendered identities, the body, sport and life plans. These themes provided a comparative framework for all the interviews, while also allowing the women some freedom to explore areas of their choice. The following discussion focuses on data relating to how these top-level players entered football and their experiences in a male-defined sporting world. By focusing on in-depth, individual experiences in different national and cultural contexts, we explore theoretical debates around universal structures of power, differences between women, and the significance of the 'contextuality of meaning' (Bordo, 1993: 24).

Results

Becoming a Footballer

Kicking About with the Lads — All of the interviewees began playing football when they were quite young. In England, Germany and Norway the average starting age was between 4 and 6, whereas the Spanish players were older, at 11 years of age. These early experiences were generally in informal spaces within local neighbourhoods. In talking about their first experiences many of the women recounted the significance of the street and parks as the spaces where they began their footballing careers:

> I just started to kick a football in the back streets, it was great fun. (Jane, England)

> I really wanted to play soccer. I thought that was the most fun. Besides I have always played soccer with the boys on the streets. (Berit, Norway)

In his research into sport and masculinity in the USA, Messner's (1992) interviewees revealed that their childhood experiences of sport occurred in an exclusively male world. It is at this stage that masculine identities and an early commitment to sport become tightly interrelated. It would seem that the majority of the footballers in our research gained access to the male sporting world of the streets and parks through male contacts and support. Even at this early age, the opportunities for girls to choose their physical activities were largely dependent on male encouragement and approval. Many of the women in our research were encouraged by fathers, brothers or male friends to step into this 'boys' space' and thus gained entry into the informal male football culture.

There were, however, some cultural differences in relation to how the women began playing football. As mentioned earlier, the Spanish footballers began to play when they were older. Although streets and parks were mentioned in these

interviews, in contrast to the women in the other three countries, female friends were highlighted as the most significant people in encouraging them to play. It may be that access to open space is more restricted for young girls in Spain up to the age of 10 or 11 years. Transgressing the boundaries of gendered space may be more difficult in some cultural contexts. This suggests the cultural specificity of gender, yet also confirms the ability of some girls and women to negotiate gendered expectations, albeit at different times and in different contexts.

The importance of streets and parks for the early football experiences of top-level players is interesting if we reflect on changing patterns of childhood play. In England, for example, the 'moral panics' associated with recent cases of child abduction and murder, are likely to result in a more rigorous control of children's street activities. Together with globalization and developments in technology, such as computer games and satellite television, this potential move towards more home-based recreation and leisure for young people may result in street games and park visits being things of the past. If so, then the opportunities for sport participation offered by formal institutions (e.g. schools, clubs, and leisure centres) may become even more important in the future for girls' and young women's access to sporting opportunities.

Only Boys Can Play . . . — At school some of the women faced major barriers to their participation. There are interesting differences here relating to how sport is organized in each country. Since sporting opportunities for young people in Germany and Norway are based on a club system, players from these countries did not identify the school as having had a significant impact on their early experiences of competitive sport. Although some had struggled to find female soccer teams, several had played on boys' teams until the ages of 12 or 14. In both Germany and Norway it was the players themselves who were active in setting up girls' teams and putting in place the club system that exists today:

> We had much fun playing with the boys . . . I had problems when I was 14 because then I had to leave the boys' team. I could not play on a woman's team, you had to be at least 15, so they wrote a call for girls in the newspapers and we organized a girls' team. (Ingrid, Germany)

> We had to organize ourselves, get a coach and trainer. We were not accepted in a club at that time. We managed to get a coach and get started as a girls' team. (Jorun, Norway)

In England the story was somewhat different. The players indicated that their first real barriers to participation occurred when they entered the schooling system. At primary school (5 to 11 years) there are no legal restrictions on girls competing in football, although most of the women either were not allowed to play with boys or had to battle for opportunities:

> I wasn't allowed to play at school so I just had to kick a ball about when I got the chance. (Karen, England)

> I only played at break and lunchtime. I used to play then, I wasn't allowed to play in the boys team or anything like that. (Kim, England)

The barriers faced by the English players were exacerbated when they transferred into secondary school at 11 years of age. All the interviewees commented that they were not allowed to play at school, even those who had obtained access at a younger age. A major problem was the continued division of the girls and boys into 'sex-appropriate' activities:

> When I went up to senior school there was nothing . . . that was the attitude that they had to it. The girls and the lads are kept separate for sports. I hated secondary school because at dinnertime we just sat and did nothing whereas at junior school we used to be out playing football. (Jan, England)

In England, the few women who did manage to play some football at school still had to negotiate attitudes suggesting that football was inappropriate for girls. This supports the findings by Scraton (1992) and Flintoff (1993) that gender ideologies remain firmly embedded within the content and teaching of physical education. The Spanish respondents talked very little about their early playing experiences. They had no opportunity to join club teams until they were 14, 18 or in one case 22. Like the English players, they identified the school as the key institution for providing opportunities for sport participation and competition. These occasions were gender-specific with little or no access for girls to play football.

Gendered Sporting Identities

Although we are cognizant of the critique of the early social psychological work in the 1970s and 1980s on the perceived conflict between sport and femininity and gender role socialization (Connell, 1983, 1987; Hall, 1996), issues relating to the women's self-perceptions of their gendered identities was a strong theme among the interviewees. All of the women talked constantly about themselves as being 'other' to female or feminine, particularly when describing their childhood experiences:

> I was like a tomboy. I spent a lot of time together with the boys. It was fun and a little rough. (Inger, Norway)

> I've always been a tomboy. I can remember me and my Dad playing and then wanting to join in with the boys at junior school. (Jenny, England)

> I always wanted to be a boy because girls are not allowed to climb trees, to be a member of a gang, to play cowboys and Indians, to play soccer and to be involved in all these exciting adventures. (Gudrun, Germany)

> I was a tomboy, a tough guy, climbed trees and did many bad things. I preferred to play cars instead of dolls and I loved ice hockey . . . girls were stupid, they always started to cry, they could not run. (Andrea, Germany)

In these expressive, almost sad quotes, the women are relationally constructing a self via what they consider themselves not to be — that is, girls. They distance themselves from anything that they define as feminine, almost to the point of misogyny. The majority defined themselves as 'tomboys'. Hall (1996) provides a thorough discussion and feminist critique of the term 'tomboyism',

problematizing its use in developmental psychology, biology and sociobiology. Research in these fields has focused on how girls and young women act 'too much like a tom, or a man . . . a spirited young girl who behaves like a boisterous boy' (Hall, 1996: 16). Such girls are viewed as deviant, other than the feminine norm. The use of the term 'tomboy' supports the 'naturalness' of the dualities of male sport/female sport and masculinity/femininity thus reducing cultural and social constructs to biological fact.

Most of the women did not suggest that their performances as 'tomboys' created any conflict for them as girls; in fact, they saw it as a positive aspect of their identity. This is unsurprising given that the dominant cultural definition of 'tomboy' is a girl who displays masculine attributes, particularly those valued most highly in the sports world (e.g. competitiveness, aggression, boisterousness and active physicality). As mentioned earlier, almost all the women named their brothers, fathers and/or male friends as being highly significant in their early years. For these significant others, the girls were displaying positive behaviour and characteristics that complemented a sporting identity. However, some of the German women did suggest that even at this early age they had found it difficult identifying as 'tomboys', 'sporty' or girls. These women talked about their struggles as children in relation to the 'ideal' expectations of femininity. Some commented on how they had wanted to be a boy or like a boy; others had used boys' clothes and were proud to be identified as boys. One German player reported that she fitted in so well with the boys that 'there were many that didn't even know that I was a girl!' (Andrea, Germany).

'Doing' gender is not about acting out a fixed role, although as Butler (1990) argues, failing to 'do gender right', or the act of 'performing one's gender wrong', can initiate punishment. To 'do gender right' means to conform to dominant cultural expectations about femininity. Although these can change over time and context, there was a need for the women to define themselves (as girls and young women) in opposition to femininity in order to gain entry into the footballing world. In football, the women were performing their gender as self-defined 'tomboys' in ways that transgressed dominant notions of young female behaviour. Yet this very act of self-definition valorizes masculinity, boys and men — it does not transform existing gender relations. The language the women used to communicate their experiences leaves no doubt about their perceptions of masculinity and their views that men and boys are dominant and more highly valued. By perceiving themselves to be 'like boys' they reinforce and reproduce, rather than challenge, the power relations between male/female and the binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and men's sport/women's sport.

As the women talked about their development as footballers it became apparent that, for many of them, their identities as gendered sportswomen became more problematic in adulthood. A full discussion of this area is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note that there would appear to be a complex relationship between their identities as female footballers and dominant notions of femininity and sexuality, particularly in relation to 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1981). As hegemonic ideals of femininity are constructed from a white, middle-class stereotype of heterosexual attractiveness, there are considerable ambiguities and tensions for the footballers around active

physicality, lesbianism and homophobia from both outside and within the game. Football is an arena that can provide a relatively safe, shared space for lesbian women, but can also produce hyper-femininity as a strategy of resistance and negotiation with homophobia. As the following player commented:

> I like to get really muddy and do what the heck I like on the football pitch but I sometimes get really dressed up at night. I think I get fed up being labelled — you know she plays soccer so she's butch. (Kim, England)

A 'Female World'?

Although women's football appears to be one of the fastest growing sports for women in all four countries studied, the game remains heavily influenced and controlled by men. There are qualitative differences between the countries, with women's football being least culturally marginal and contested in Norway, while both Germany and Norway provide more material support (Laur, 1997). However, it remains the case that women's football remains dependent on the male sporting world for its survival in all four nations. Facilities and financial resources seem routinely worse for women and there is a recognition that the development of the women's game relies on integration into men's football. In none of the countries has it been possible for women to 'go it alone' (Lopez, 1997). The reasons for this are complex, but clearly reflect the legacy and continued existence of powerful ideologies surrounding women's participation that impact on the public perception of the game and structure the sport. As one of the Norwegian players stated:

> Women's soccer is still very young. If you look at the audience, we don't take in much money, because it is not as popular as men's soccer. We therefore only have to accept that we are second stringers. There is nothing we can do about that. This is just the way it is. Women's soccer is never going to be accepted in the same way as men's soccer, I believe . . . never. (Wenche, Norway)

Nevertheless, the women in our research have overcome many obstacles to their access and are now experiencing the game of football for themselves. Although playing football has different meanings for different women, there are some shared meanings and values identified by all the players. For example, they all derived a tremendous amount of pleasure from playing the game and feeling in control and the excitement of 'being physical'. Probably the most frequently mentioned aspect of their experiences was the pleasure they gained from being together, their connectedness as women and as a team:

> They are the best group of lassies, like a family. It's the social side I like best. I know everyone so well, you look after each other. (Sue, England)

> . . . if you play an individual sport you can only be glad for yourself. If you are in a team — this is a wonderful feeling if you have an important game and if you get a goal. It doesn't matter who makes the goal — but if the ball is in the net — we all throw ourselves on the ground — we embrace each other — that is great, this being together. (Petra, Germany)

Words such as 'togetherness', 'social' and 'belonging' dominated the inter-

view transcripts. Women's football, although controlled by male football organizations, is a female space that the women enjoy together as a team. There would appear to be a female football culture that cuts across national boundaries. These shared meanings were expressed in relation to the pleasures of an active physicality experienced by the players:

> . . . the sensations of movement, the energy that it gives. (Maria, Spain)
>
> . . . playing soccer you can find out what you and your body can do, what you can do with a ball, to juggle with a ball, to let it fly in a high angle. (Ingrid, Germany)
>
> Getting muddy, diving here, there and everywhere. There's nothing better than making a save. It's brilliant, you're flying through the air. (Jenny, England)

A key concern about women entering 'male' sports such as football is the possibility that this will simply reproduce the dominant masculine values that have become central to the game (e.g. competition, aggression, 'win at all costs'). Our research just begins to touch on some of these issues. The female players found active physicality to be both positive and pleasurable. They attached values to the game that are closely associated with being female such as connectedness, sharing and supporting each other. Hargreaves (1994: 252) argues that: 'it is inevitable that if men have so much influence, they will impose on the women's game their own values and practices, and women footballers are being effectively schooled to copy what men do'. Our research would suggest that, although men do have considerable influence on the women's game, even when women have no conscious intentions of resistance, they do incorporate their own meanings into their activities. Women play with aggression, skill, determination and competition; yet they also articulate a central concern for cooperation, support, connectedness, and fun. It is these values that the women stressed almost unanimously during the interviews and were most significant to them.

Conclusion

Females are participating in football in increasing numbers in some European nations, especially in Norway and Germany. The rate is somewhat slower in England and is just in the 'kick-off' phase in Spain. We can conclude that the liberal-feminist agenda of increasing access to sporting opportunities has opened up football to more female players in all four countries. Our research shows that many of these women have had to overcome barriers that the male world of soccer continues to impose. The development of a well-organized youth policy for girls and young women would seem to be crucial in increasing female participation rates. Such policies are better established in Germany and Norway, with the benefits highlighted by the female players in relation to their early opportunities to participate. The school systems in England and Spain do not provide the encouragement that is needed for young women to fulfil their footballing potential, particularly while the schools continue to be inscribed by powerful gender ideologies.

Our research findings reflect, to a certain extent, the complexities and con-

tradictions of gender relations in the 1990s. Images of femininity are diversifying in sport as women gain access to traditionally male-defined activities. But just how far women are actually transgressing the boundaries of acceptable femininity is debatable. Women who play football and exhibit strength, get muddy and dirty, and engage in physical contact would seem to be demonstrating a shift in what is deemed to be acceptable female behaviour. As girls and young women, they challenge conventional standards of femininity by positively associating with and defining themselves as boys or 'tomboys'. However, this does not present a major challenge to the obdurate masculine/feminine dichotomy. Rather, these women have simply crossed gendered boundaries in order to access a sport that is associated with masculine traits. This act does not help to redefine hegemonic notions of femininity, as these women simply become 'tomboys' or 'token boys' for a period of their lives. If anything, they rarefy masculinity by their aspirations to be 'like a boy'. And in order to do this, they have the support of significant men and boys in their lives.

It has been recognized for some time that girls and young women are accommodated, and sometimes almost encouraged, to cross this boundary. It makes them lively, spunky and even adventurous. These qualities are accepted and often admired in pre-pubescent girls. However, adult femininity incorporates a dominant notion of heterosexuality, so transgressing boundaries becomes more problematic (Maynard and Purvis, 1995). By displaying qualities usually associated with masculinity, adult women face tensions between their active physicality as footballers and what is deemed 'safe', heterosexual femininity. Homophobia is evident within football and female players' responses to it are an important area for further in-depth, ethnographic research.

Although some aspects of the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity are disrupted by strong, physically active women playing a sport defined traditionally as male, there is little evidence in our research that women's football provides a serious threat to the gender order. While many of the players have benefited from less gender-stereotyped childhoods (which is central to a liberal-feminist agenda), structures of power still remain in the hands of men and 'compulsory heterosexuality' continues to be a pervasive ideology. This is by no means total or uncontested — some of the women in our study did challenge dominant assumptions about femininity and female sexuality.

Our research has highlighted the need to recognize differences both among individual women and across different national contexts. It has been important to look outside the narrow confines of our own countries in order to share and learn from existing 'good practices' and successful initiatives elsewhere. However, a total concentration on difference and diversity fails to recognize the similarities that emerge between women footballers in different contexts. These include some of the experiences women have of playing football, the values and meanings they attach to these experiences, and the continued impact and control that men have within football in each country. Although more women are receiving greater opportunities, their life chances are still determined by the gender regimes that exist in both school and community-based sport programs. As women's football develops, it will be interesting to note whether women 'buy into' the competitive, commercialized and commodified men's game or try to construct their own

values and meanings. Hargreaves (1994: 252) describes the radical challenge in a football club in London, England, which has a written a constitution stating that women must have complete control, and is trying to develop creative ways of playing the game which they call 'a woman's philosophy of football'. This is the 'catch-22' for women: if they take control then they have to exist within a world where men continue to hold ideological and material power. As the women in this research argued in all four countries, they remain dependent on the male sporting world to provide the opportunities that they need at a top competitive level.

In summary, the experiences of women playing in traditionally male-defined sports need more in-depth analysis. Theoretically, we must move from a simplistic understanding of socialization processes or the dualities of masculinity and femininity and toward an understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of women's experiences. These experiences must be located in specific contexts and recognize the continued significance of gendered structures of power. Researching women's experiences of playing a 'traditionally' male sport such as football is an important way to begin qualitative investigations into experiences of sport that move beyond participation rates and begin to explore some of these current theoretical concerns.

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