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**Is football now feminist? A critique of the use of McCaughey's physical feminism to explain women's participation in separate leagues in masculine sports. <sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past two decades there have been a number of sociological investigations of participation by women in sports that had previously appeared to have been played exclusively by men. These investigations have rightly celebrated this participation as examples of greater physical empowerment, choice and freedom for women in sport. Several of these investigations have gone further by utilizing McCaughey's notion of physical feminism to argue that participation in these sports is indicative of a broader feminist political challenge. This paper contends that this characterization of the broader political challenge is a misinterpretation of McCaughey's physical feminism. Further, this misinterpretation is indicative of the theoretical underpinnings of the shift from a second wave radical feminism to a third wave celebrity feminism. This paper proposes a set of commitments that would be necessary, although not sufficient, to see these women's leagues as feminist organizations that politically challenge patriarchal power.

**Keywords:** women, feminism, power, sport, resistance

## Introduction

Sport remains the most publicly mediatized demonstration of difference between the sexes, and this difference is most evocatively revealed in the sports that present themselves as exclusively male (Kissane and Winslow 2016, 821; MacLean 2016, 1374; McCaughey 1997, 43). During the past two decades, there have been a number of papers in the sociology of sport (for example, Cauldwell 2003; Fink, La Voi and Newhall 2016; Mennesson 2000; Migliaccio and Berg 2007; Pelak 2002; Scraton et. al. 1999; Theberge 1997, 1998, 2003; Velija 2011; Wedgewood 2004; Willson *et al* 2017; Wood and Garn 2016) and history of sport (for example, Cox 2012; Curtin 2016; Haines 2016; Hess 2005, 2011; Lenkic and Hess 2016; Linden 2015; Wedgewood 2005; Williams 2002, 2007) literatures that have investigated, and mostly celebrated, the development of women's leagues<sup>2</sup> in the 'flag carrier' sports (Bryson, 1990 cited by Theberge 1997, 70) that were previously played mostly by men, and celebrated as 'epitomizing hegemonic masculinity' (Wedgewood 2005, 396). This literature suggests that it is apparent that newly legitimate female sporting subjectivities have been produced because of the successful development of these new leagues for females.

I am torn by the effects of the introduction of these women's leagues.<sup>3</sup> It is inspiring to see that opportunities and support for women's participation in these sports has expanded to the point where the peak organizations have finally recognised growth opportunities in supporting adult and junior women's leagues. As Mariah Nelson explained so evocatively: 'For every man with a baseball story- a memory of a moment at the plate or in the field- there is a woman with a couldn't-play-baseball story' (1991, 11 cited in Fairchild 1994, 372). In no way should the orientation of this paper be taken as a criticism of either the courageous work done by the women pioneers in 'masculine

sports' whose histories have only recently been revealed, or of the participation of contemporary women in the modern versions of these leagues, or of the important ethnographic studies that have investigated this participation and revealed the stories of the experience of women players.

The question that this paper will deal with is how the development of women's competitions in sports that were previously publicized as, played exclusively by men, can become sites for feminist political resistance. Will the increasing participation of women in traditionally 'masculine sports' like ice-hockey and the football codes, and the development of professional women's leagues in these sports, mean that participation in these leagues by female players can be read as counterhegemonic feminist political activity or incorporated resistance? To make such a claim, it is important to define what feminism is. Here, I support both the argument of Denise Thompson (1994, 173; 2000. 373) that, '[t]o define feminism is to take responsibility for what one says about feminism,' whilst also recognising that definitions are applicable in 'particular contexts for particular purposes' and not fixed for ever. So, in the particular history and context of women playing sports that they were previously excluded from, I also suggest that Thompson's definition of feminism remains highly relevant:

Feminism is centrally concerned with questions of power, power in the sense of relations of domination/subordination, and power in the sense of ability, capacity and opportunity to control the conditions of one's existence (1994, 173).

Feminism necessarily connects epistemology with the 'social and political goals of feminism' (Grasswick and Webb 2002, 186; MacKinnon 1987, 169; Olive and Thorpe 2011, 424). Because of the long history of men's domination in these sports, the contestation and transformation of both these sports, and of society, is critical to

feminism. Martha McCaughey explains: ‘Feminists all agree that systematic power relations can be changed; that’s what makes feminism a theory as well as a *social movement*’ (1997, 200, my italicization).

This paper, like Sailors’ paper on whether gender segregation is conducive to greater power for women athletes (2016, 1126), is not a sociological revelation of patterns of what women athletes in these sports think, say and do. It is obvious that a set of new athletic subjectivities have been produced for women in these sports. Whether these new sporting subjectivities have the same ‘transformative potential’ (Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce 2017, 362) as McCaughey’s self-defense subjectivities is the starting point of debate for this paper. The larger focus of this paper is to question the empowerment tropes that are part of these leagues, and emphasised in both the popular media and the research literatures concerning these leagues, in terms of the political dimension of Thompson’s definition of feminism that I responsibly attest is necessary for these leagues to be considered feminist organizations.

### **Expressions of Female Empowerment in ‘Masculine Sport’**

Sports remain something of an oddity of contemporary life in the many countries where these leagues are developing, in that women have been excluded, through law or hegemonic discourse, from respected participation in certain sports. The radical feminist claim for the importance of transformational political practices in society (Thompson 1994; Fraser 1995; Young 1997) is, by necessity because of this history, preceded in sports by simple affirmation of female participation. The idea is explained well by Catherine MacKinnon when she states that although she thinks ‘the real feminist issue is not whether biological males or biological females hold positions

of power,' she also contends that it is utterly essential that women are in these positions of power in order to promote the 'real feminist issue' (1987, 77). The movement from women being an ignored or 'despised gender' (Fraser 1995, 79) in sports such as ice hockey and the various football codes, to being participants who can challenge the androcentrism of existing discourses in these sports, begins with participation, or probably more accurately, recovering the stories from those who played these sports in a period of a hidden history (Lenkic and Hess, 2016; Linden 2015).

The importance of the woman-athlete-in-masculine-sport ethnographies and [her]stories are that they reveal testimonies about women's experiences of these sports, and, in this revelation, will demonstrate difference to men's experiences. McCaughey was emphatic that many women's experiences of self-defense were significantly different to the experiences of male participants, because of the contextual positioning of men and women produced by the dominance of the rape culture discourse in society (also see Mierzwinski, Velija and Malcolm 2014, 76). Similarly, women's experiences of participation in masculine sports has to be read within the context of being despised, ignored or forgotten. By moving the marginalized stories of these female athletes to 'the centre of interest and concern', the woman becomes the author of her own experiences (Fairchild 1994, 373; Cauldwell 2003; Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce 2017, 376), rather than having a male-human discourse imposed on her experience (Thompson 1994, 174).

This shift commences the transformative political project of more collective feminist action based on the similarity and aggregation of individual experiences of women athletes of various sports. What has been revealed in the ethnographic and interview-based studies of women's participation in such sports is remarkably consistent across sports and across nations. The studies reveal the following consistent

themes of empowerment, freedom and individual choice for the participants in women's sporting leagues:

- 1) The opportunity to participate in teams that produce 'family-like' relationships based in trust and interpersonal support (Liechty, Willfong and Sveinson 2016; Migliacco and Berg 2007; Paul and Blank 2015)
- 2) The opportunity to work with a diverse group of women who share a common cause, partly centred around the origin and sustainability of the team and the league (Liechty, Willfong and Sveinson 2016; Migliacco and Berg 2007; Pelak 2002; Wedgewood 2004; Willson *et al* 2017)
- 3) The opportunity to act aggressively and engage in physicality in ways that have traditionally been denied to women, and in ways that female participants experienced as personally enjoyable and pleasurable (Channon and Phipps 2017; Liechty, Willfong and Sveinson 2016; Migliacco and Berg 2007; Paul and Blank 2015; Roth and Bastow 2004; Theberge 2003; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013)
- 4) The potential to develop a new style or discourse of play that emanates from the female experience (Pelak 2002; Theberge 2003)
- 5) The opportunity to build bodies that are capable of exhibiting physical qualities, such as strength and power, that have been traditionally associated with male bodies (Liechty, Willfong and Sveinson 2016; Migliacco and Berg 2007; Theberge 2003; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013; Wedgewood 2004).<sup>4</sup>

Descriptions of football, ice hockey or boxing as female bodywork in the pursuit of a male athletic ideal; that is, descriptions in the existing male discourse, ignore the ways that the female player experiences these sports as sites of expansion of her individual freedom, choice and empowerment, and as sites for the enjoyment of her resistant



physicality (Theberge 2003, 506; Mierzwinski, Velija and Malcolm 2014, 74-75; McCaughey 1998, 283). The understanding of physical participation in such sports is a gendered understanding, affected by a history of non-participation or submerged experience.

Some sociologists of sport have used McCaughey's (1997; 1998) idea of 'physical or corporeal feminism' to suggest that participation in these sports is both individually empowering for players (Liechty, Willfong and Sveinson 2016; Liimakka 2011; Migliacco and Berg 2007; Paul and Blank 2015; Theberge 2003; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013) and politically resistant or transformational for women generally. Whilst the testimonies of research participants certainly give detailed support to the achievement of the first of these goals, I am not convinced that participation in segregated leagues in 'masculine sports' can have a similar effect to the broader feminist political transformations that McCaughey's self-defenders are believed to produce.

### **Explaining the Political Agenda of McCaughey's Physical Feminism**

Rape culture accepts men's aggression against women as normal, sexy, and/or inevitable and often regards women's refusal of it as pathological, unnatural, and "aggressive" (McCaughey 1998, 2; 1997, 7)

McCaughey (1997; 1998) commences her argument with the position that the identification of violence, both inside and out of sport, with patriarchy by radical feminists had itself been a successful patriarchal regulatory method supporting the embodied oppression of women. The maleness of reason about violence convinced

women that any use of violence, even as a defense against attack from another, was a manifestation of a corrupt masculine practice, a misguided attempt to use ‘the master’s tools’ to challenge his position of power (McCaughey 1998, 277).

In contrast, actual engagement of women in self-defense allows these women to celebrate their potential for aggressive violence, which causes a re-thinking by these women about this regulatory discourse of violence from women’s perspectives (1997, 10-15). Self-defense classes allow women to ‘unlearn’ femininity and the ‘rape myths’ which reinforce the hegemonic belief that women need protection from bad men by good men (McCaughey 1997, 9; 1998, 277-278; Marcus 1992, 391). Women in self-defense classes learn an assertive and powerful body comportment (Cahill 2009, 364; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013, 531). For these women, the patriarchal control of the ‘rape script’ is incomplete. Within this gap, the self-defending actor, consciously or subconsciously, rewrites and performs to a new script (McCaughey 1997, 103; 1998, 281; Marcus 1992, 392; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013, 536). In McCaughey’s terms, women ‘develop a new self-image, a new understanding of what a female body can do, and thus break out of the expectations under which they have acted- expectations that have cemented themselves at the level of the body’ (1998, 281; also see Cahill 2009; Channing and Phipps 2017).

Self-defense classes teach a script which is ‘written into’ women’s athletic bodies (McCaughey 1998, 283-285). Women practice assertiveness, violent confrontation, confidence, authority and bodily sovereignty against men, in a set of controlled, simulated drills, and with the endorsement of classmates and instructors. This new embodied script can affect all aspects of the women’s lives, and sometimes allows these women to make transformational changes to their personal lives. Women who experienced these transforming effects testified that such training had propelled

them to leave abusive relationships, demand greater participation in workplaces, refuse to be bullied in personal, work or public life, make decisive life choices, and make demands on partners in terms of support in unpaid labour (McCaughey 1997; Mennesson 2000, 30). Up to this point in McCaughey's theory of physical feminism, there is much similarity with the sport related ethnographies above.

However, McCaughey's notion of physical feminism includes two aspects; a personally empowering change in the women who engaged in self-defense classes, and a specific political-epistemological challenge to the 'rape culture' narrative of the broader society (Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013, 527). Self-defense allows for the imagination of, and pleased celebration in, a new bodily and verbal script that defies rape culture discourse (McCaughey 1998, 285, 290, 297). The bodily script produces a general feminist consciousness-raising exercise that disputes the positioning of man-as-dominant and woman-as-victim (Cahill 2009, 367). A counterhegemonic lived reality is exemplified in the intense physicality of mock attacks that continue until the attacker is disabled and not simply defeated (McCaughey 1997, 65; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013, 531; Channing and Phipps 2017, 25). The revised scripts that are being learnt in self-defense classes; the aggressive yelling and screaming, the swearing, the assertion of rights to bodily space and the 'getting mean' (McCaughey 1997, 61-65), are also backed by embodied scripts that directly challenged hegemonic masculinity in the broader society. Success stories of women fighting back against male domination and/or threatening behaviour provides 'an alternative fantasized possibility for action,' (McCaughey, 1998, 284) that is an important part of the feminist consciousness-raising that challenges the broader patriarchal power in society (McCaughey 1997, 66-67, 100-102).

## **New Sport Participation and Physical Feminism**

McCaughey (1997, 156) recognised the difference between self-defense and sport participation herself, stating: ‘Women’s self-defense has an impact similar to women’s sports, but it is potentially more radical.’ In contrast to the scripts learnt by self-defenders, women who enter female competitions in previously ‘masculine sports’, where they perform against other women, may learn a new script, but it is not a script that challenges patriarchal power. If anything, it reinforces the hegemony. The physical scripts of participation in these sports are decidedly single-sexed. The participation of women in these ‘masculine sport’ leagues may be another example of acts that are “simultaneously *both* empowering and oppressive” (Beaver, 2016, 654 cited by Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce, 2017, 365; Clark and Paechter 2007, 262).

McDonagh and Pappano (2008, 8; also see Sailors 2016, 1128) explain that:

the organization of sports in American society is based on a principle of coercive sex segregation...Specifically, we argue that coercive sex segregation in sports is based on three false assumptions, what we term the three I’s: (1) female inferiority compared to males, (2) the need to protect females from injury in competition with males, and (3) the immorality of females competing directly with males.

These sports leagues produce a further buttressing of the segregationist discourse that *all* women, even strong and athletic female athletes playing physical sports, require protection from competition against *all* men. Following the work of Hood-Williams (1995, 1996) and others, it is harder to support any biological basis for either gender or sex binaries; that is, on the important sporting physical and mental characteristics, there

is both overlap between members of the socially constructed categories of men and women, and great variability within either of the categories. However, popular discourses about sport, including legal judgments in equal opportunity cases that men and women over a certain age must play separately because of gender-wide anatomical and physiological differences (Burke 2010; McArdle 1999), have supported a socially constructed binary around ‘masculine sports’ (Hird 2000, 354) which participation by women is a first step in breaking down. But resisting the persistence of this socially constructed binary requires more than just participation.

McCaughey explains that, ‘unless women’s self-defense training is situated in a larger framework of sex inequality, it could end up an individualized and less effective force for social change’ (1997, xi). In contrast to this broader contextualisation of self-defense classes, female competitions in ‘masculine sports’ have been couched within the postfeminist lens (Toffoletti 2016) of greater equality, choice and individual empowerment for women participants, but of no challenge to the dominant episteme of male superiority (Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013, 538). What comes after this initial step of participation in these sports, a form of reproductive agency, is the important thing to assess. The next section of this paper will look at the recent debates between fourth wave radical feminists, and the celebrity feminism of the third wave<sup>5</sup>, to produce some ideas about what the next steps may need to be to get to a physical feminism, a political challenge to male domination, in these sports leagues.

### **Radicalizing Individual Empowerment**

In privileging individual choice above all else, it [choice feminism] doesn’t challenge the status quo. It doesn’t demand significant social change, and it

effectively undermines calls for collective action... Instead of resistance, we now have activities that were once held up as archetypes of women's subordinate status being presented as liberating personal choices. (Tyler 2015, my insertion)

Nancy Fraser's recent work (2009; 2013; Fraser and Brenner 2017) tracks the history of the de-politicization of radical feminism against broader economic changes in especially Western societies. She explains that second-wave radical feminism arose out of the period of relative prosperity and extensive welfare state supports of the post-War boom (2013, 208; 2009, 101-102). It originated from a transformation of the benign liberal economic-political 'imaginary' to include a 'broad range of forms of male dominance' (2013, 208) that emanated from the collective personal experiences of women, and which collectively formed 'a radical challenge to the pervasive androcentrism of state-led capitalist societies in the postwar era' (2009, 97).

The second phase of the history of radical feminism was one where, the transformative expansion of the economic insights of radical feminism were reinvented to foreground a 'politics of recognition,' and were 'drawn into the orbit of identity politics' (2013, 206). The subsequent 'neglect' of the broader economic transformations of societies, and the focus on identity politics, created an easy target for the free-market ideologies and 'rightwing chauvinism that emerged in the wake' (2013, 207) of the serious social dislocations in the West in the late 1980s (2013, 210; 2009, 97). The decoupling of radical feminism from a 'project of political-economic transformation and distributive justice' (2013, 211) to a politics of recognition, also resulted in the subsuming of the goals of feminism to the goals of neoliberalism, such that:

... the turn to recognition dovetailed all too neatly with a hegemonic neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social egalitarianism. The result was a tragic irony. Instead of arriving at a broader, richer paradigm that could encompass both redistribution and recognition, we effectively traded one truncated paradigm for another- a truncated economism for a truncated culturalism (2013, 212; also see Fraser and Brennan 2017, 131, 132)

Into this space of a truncated culturalism stepped celebrity feminism; a safe, fun form of feminism whose response to the cultural and economic hegemony of neoliberalism that resulted in forces that supported the reduction of the welfare state, the turn against affirmative action, the masculinizing of politics<sup>6</sup>, and ‘the upward redistribution of wealth’ (Fraser 2013, 216), was that empowered females could choose/lean in to get part of that bounty.

Fraser claims that the advent of neoliberal or celebrity feminism marks an ‘impasse’ in feminism, ‘stymied by the hostile, post-9/11 political climate’ (2013, 204), such that female successes are evaluated in the individualizing language of the dominant hegemony, rather than the collective language of radical feminism. In her words, feminism gives charismatic service to the processes of neoliberalism and post-Fordist capitalism that run contrary to the ‘feminist vision of a just society’ (Fraser 2009, 99) by emphasizing individual empowerment, choice and equality tropes in a world of growing inequality (Fraser and Brennan 2017, 131; Azmanova 2016, 757; Whiteside *et al* 2013 417), without mentioning the goal of women’s collective liberation (Tyler 2015a). The so-called feminist political action is comfortable, lighter and performative (Murphy 2015, 18, 21; Whiteside *et al* 2013, 418), rather than confronting and transformative (Crispin 2017, 16), a popular brand of feminism, which Kiraly and

Tyler (2015) label as ‘feminism-lite’ or ‘fun feminism.’ Lying at the heart of this select section of the third wave of feminism is the belief that nothing structural stands in the way of women exhibiting free choices; that is, that women have achieved substantive equality (Thornton 2015, 45; Kiraly 2015, 61).

Claims to any broader political action in the empowered choices of fun feminists, are refuted as ignoring the effects of individual choices on the collective positioning of women as a class of people. Kiraly and Tyler (2015) refer to this as the ‘freedom fallacy.’ As Tyler (2017) so neatly summarizes:

... the idea that more choices automatically equate to more freedom is a falsehood. This is essentially just selling neo-liberalism with a feminist twist. Yes, women can now work or stay at home if they have children, for example, but this “choice” is fairly hollow when child-rearing continues to be constructed as “women’s work”, there is insufficient state support for childcare, and childless women are decried as selfish.

In Murphy’s (2016; also see Tyler 2015b, 189-190; Crispin 2017, 17; Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce, 2017, 371) terms: ‘We cannot frame “choice” as political while simultaneously depoliticising and decontextualising the choices women make, in a capitalist patriarchy.’

What does this mean for those who hope to find transformative feminist outcomes from women participating in sports that have discursively been masculine? Fraser emphasizes that gender is paradigmatically a bivalent collectivity which encompasses ‘political-economic dimensions and cultural-valuational dimensions’ (1995, 78) such that feminist justice requires “*both* redistribution *and* recognition” (Fraser 1995, 69). It involves, according to Fraser, both revaluing and economically



sustaining a “despised gender” (1995, 79). Trading off one goal, economic security, for another, unequal recognition, will not successfully challenge male power and privilege, a point that is taken up in the next section of the paper with regards to the context of these sports.

### **Feminist Commitments in Female ‘Masculine Sports’ Leagues- Resisting the ‘Freedom Fallacy’**

Not everything labelled ‘feminist’, and argued by women and purported to be in the interests of women, in fact qualifies. (Thompson 1994, 173; also see Thompson 2000, 373)

Dworkin and Messner’s (1999, 343) call for ‘resistant agency’ where women who are inserted in these institutions of sport then work to transform the discourses that support the patriarchal order from the inside, is important in assessing the feminist political potential of these leagues. Without exhausting the possible strategies for politicizing individual empowerment, I think that there are three commitments that should be made within women’s leagues and competitions that will be necessary to achieve feminist epistemological-political gains:

- 1) The importance of consciousness-raising
- 2) The need for collective and women-centred organizations
- 3) A radical challenge to the broader patriarchal discourse, including its contextualization in neoliberal capitalism

These three commitments will negate moves towards either a truncated culturalism or a truncated economism in these leagues.

The successes of second wave radical feminism largely emanated from consciousness raising within women's spaces that were autonomously created by women (MacKay 2015, 157; Fraser 2009, 105). These spaces allowed for the personal, the specific and the gendered experiences of the woman, to be collected and placed in a larger discursive context, so as to produce political action (Long 2015, 149). Consciousness-raising in these sporting spaces should include a recognition of the legal and cultural wars that women have had to endure to simply play these sports (Willson *et al* 2017). Current players in these newly developed leagues should be educated about the historical [ab]use of equal opportunity legislation that expelled women who had been successfully playing in adult and late-adolescent leagues (Burke 2010; Willson *et al*, 2017), and the cultural ignorance, trivialization or derision towards pioneering female players in the women's leagues, as revealed in the histories of these sports.

In addition, as part of this group consciousness-raising, it will be important to continue to retrieve the life her-stories of these players and their pioneering leagues in ways that foreground the women's voices and experiences of marginalization, rather than as re-packaged mediatized puff pieces that applaud the current backing from men's leagues. The early history of many of these women's leagues is one of contestation and violent reaction from men's organizations. It should not be lost when thinking about the current levels of support from men's sport organizations. Rather than uncritically applauding at the development of these new leagues, we should ask, given this history, 'why now?' (Robinson 2016). The suggestion that the very men's sports organizations, who backed the discursive and legal barriers in front of women participants in the past, have now become the friends of women players at precisely the time that their men's markets are under threat from new sports and activities, seems to accept a truncated culturalism. Rather than seeing the new women's professional leagues in these sports as

subsidized by men's leagues, the new leagues become the expansion in the market that allows for the sustainability of these sports into the future. This then resists the popular discursive sentiment, captured by Brown, that feminist reform 'supported' by male legal and economic support is more in line with 'a politics of feudalism than freedom' (cited by Thornton 2006, 151). 'Why now' questions allow for politically transformative answers to be developed which place these women's leagues in a greater position of power, in negotiations regarding access to resources, facilities and cultural capital in these sports.

The second transformative commitment is that feminist action requires collective responses that recognises the positioning of women as women within the politics of the social binary. The need for women-controlled organizations that promote women into authority positions, and challenge the maleness of sporting authority, will also sponsor a more transformative feminist change. Hays (1994, 64 cited in Kissane and Winslow 2016, 822) makes the important point that an individual's agency 'occurs on a continuum' between categories of reproductive and transformative agency. Hays (1994, 64 cited in Kissane and Winslow 2016, 824; also see Linden 2015, 2176) continues by stating that the positioning of actions on the continuum of agency:

... is influenced by the depth and durability of the structural form in question, by the level of power held by those making choices, and by the larger cultural milieu in which the choices are made.

Women's participation in these sports is often controlled and limited by decisions made by men in authority positions. These sports have a long, deep and durable history of male control, which may now extend over the women's leagues. Sharing of success and failure stories and transformative strategies across women's sports, such as from roller

derby (Beaver 2012; Paul and Blank 2015; Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce 2017) and other sports (Pelak 2002), can also offer a sense of collective female action that breaks down boundaries between different sports. Collectivities arise around 'being a woman athlete', rather than around being 'a footballer' or 'an ice-hockey player.'<sup>7</sup> In addition, whilst this paper has dealt mostly with sports from the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, more promising alliances could arise with female athletes from other nations.

The final commitment is that these leagues must find a way of challenging the broader discourse that supports gender hierarchies. McCaughey's self-defenders challenged the rape discourse that buttressed patriarchal society. What discourses can be challenged by women athletes? In sports, as in broader societies, gender structures the division between higher-paid and lower-paid athletes/workers, the division between serious male professional sports-work and non-serious female professional sports-play as determined by their media capitalization, and the hierarchy between self-funding men's sports and subsidized women's versions of these sports. Eliminating the differences in participation opportunities between men's and women's sports through redistributive affirmative action is certainly a starting point for both economic and cultural reasons, but by itself this will not challenge the androcentric discourse that creates the cultural recognition problem for women. The acceptance of a limited and acquiescent access to facilities and resources (Pelak 2002, 97-102; Wedgwood 2005, 401-403), rather than affirming a greater share of these things that is due to the women athletes because of a history of substantive discrimination, seems a truncated form of politico-economic intervention, necessitated by a discourse which still affirms 'men as the rightful guardians of sports' (Whiteside *et al* 2013, 429; Clark and Paechter 2007, 262, 265).

Whilst sacrificing the recognition of past discrimination to achieve contemporary partial redistribution of resources may be a necessary starting point for greater public recognition of female athletes, it isn't a great long-term tactic for these women's leagues in terms of promoting broader feminist political power. The provision of professional opportunities for women in these previously 'masculine sports' may lead to athletes from other sports departing public spaces where women are not [as] subordinate such as the basketball public space, the netball public space, or the athletics public space. How will this movement of talented women athletes from relatively politically and culturally neutral sporting spaces to male dominated sporting spaces play out in the broader societal public space? Do the most powerful 'masculine sports' in the marketplace, those that are the 'flag carriers' for the epitomization of hegemonic masculinity in many nations (Wedgwood 2004, 396), get even stronger by weakening other sports under the charismatic cover of sport-celebrity, empowerment feminism?

## **Conclusion**

It may seem strange to commence a paper with the idea that 'flag carrier' masculine sports are the most evocative public demonstration of male dominance in contemporary society, and then suggest that having women participating in these sports is not then, by definition, feminist action. Women athletes certainly deserve the basic economic and legal support to participate in these sports, and actually deserve greater support and access to resources to make up for decades of substantive discrimination. This support could be in the form of the provision of child-care centres, safe environments for play and substantively equal, if not affirmative, access to public stadia on which to play. But to promote a feminist outcome, women also need a shattering of

the male language of sport that defines appropriately feminine-athletic behaviour for women athletes, defines standards of excellence for sport that mirror the men's commercial versions of the games, ignores the domestic labour of women as a barrier to participation, undermines the seriousness of female sports and the authority of women athletes, and sugar-coats the past histories of these sports. If the redistribution of rewards is tied, not to individual female choice and empowerment, but to the necessary expansion of women as participants, consumers and controllers of sport, then authoritative female voices will emerge which deconstruct the maleness of understandings in these sports. Such feminist transformations will be politicized versions of equality interventions for women athletes<sup>8</sup> that go beyond the empowerment and choice rhetoric of current women's leagues. Commenting after Hillary Clinton's defeat in the US Presidential election, Jessa Crispin stated, 'it may look like women lost because we dreamed too big. In fact, women lost because we dreamed too small' (2017, 17).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term ‘masculine sport’ purely for ease, rather than stating ‘female leagues in sports traditionally played by men.’ Following from English (1978), there is no reason why these sports should be considered inherently masculine or played only by men. To exemplify that, I will continue to place the term, ‘masculine sports,’ in quotation marks throughout the paper. I must thank one of the reviewers for making this suggestion.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples of these new leagues would include the United States Women’s Football League, the Women’s Australia Football League, the English Premier 15’s Women’s Rugby Union League, as well as the many examples of professional women’s club soccer leagues throughout the world.

<sup>3</sup> I am also acutely aware of the privileges that I have had, and continue to have, as a male playing, coaching and speaking about these sports, a privilege that is challenged by female participation at all levels of these leagues.

<sup>4</sup> I must thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested this distinction between acting aggressively and building a body that is capable of participating and excelling in such sports.

<sup>5</sup> I acknowledge that the third wave of feminism runs from the powerfully resistant positions of poststructural and postmodern feminism through to more recent versions of celebrity feminism. This paper is only addressing the latter version. It should also be noted that collective consciousness raising, women-centered groups and the challenge to dominant discourses are all parts of some third wave feminist positions.

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Gill (2016, 615-617) explains that the media's attention on feminism is uneven, with comfortable celebrity feminism taking up most of this attention.

<sup>6</sup> Fraser (2013, pp. 215-216) explains this in terms of the political discourse on the 'war on terror' where the 2004 US election was a strategic victory for the Bush campaign by presenting Bush as decisive and manly whilst presenting his opponent, Kerry, as a 'girlie man' who wavered. I think this gendered discourse was exaggerated in the Trump-Clinton battle with references to Clinton's stamina, fatigue and weakness, and to Trump's strength and broad shoulders.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Das (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Something like Olive and Thorpe's (2011, 429-435) expansion of Bourdieu's concept of 'regulated liberties' would be useful in thinking of how participation in these male sports could produce broader societal discursive change. Given the long masculine history of these sports, the types of feminist change actions will, by necessity, be the ironic and humorous challenges that Olive and Thorpe have suggested when dealing with the conventional discourses and gender hierarchies in action sports.

<sup>9</sup> I must thank both the editor and the group of reviewers for their long and concerted efforts to move this paper from its initial draft into something that was worthy of final publication. Their suggestions for improvements were extensive, wise and generous.