'Don't be a douche': an introduction to sex integrated roller derby. Adele

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Introduction

Michael Cohen, a professor of American Studies and African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote the following in a blog post reflecting on a class with his students where he asked them to think of a white racial slur. His students found this a difficult task until someone eventually came up with 'douchebag'. He notes,

The douchebag is someone—overwhelmingly white, rich, heterosexual males—who insists upon, nay, demands his white male privilege in every possible set and setting. The douchebag is equally douchey (that's the adjectival version of the term) in public and in private...There are plausible objections to 'douchebag'. It feels like an overused insult. And its origins lie

in the male insult culture that identifies women's bodies as the object of contempt...An actual douchebag isn't feminine; it's a quite literally useless, sexist tool. It's alienated from women. (Cohen, 2014)

In the sport of roller derby, the refrain, 'don't be a douche[bag]' is commonly used as a way to mediate/manage the behavior of men in this previously 'women-only' (Donnelly, 2012) space. In this chapter we provide an introduction to the key issues that have arisen as men have increasingly moved from support roles (referees, coaches, officials, etc.) to active roles (as players on either men only teams, or sex integrated teams). The phrase, 'don't be a douche' is used by both men and women, *predominately* towards men. In this chapter, we highlight the various uses of this phrase as a way of illustrating the gendered tensions in roller derby as men's participation increases. The introduction of men into what has so far been a gender-segregated sport provides a rich empirical field that demonstrates key theoretical conundrums and complexities regarding gender relations.

Sport is one domain where gender segregation has remained (for the most part) formally and traditionally unquestioned (Anderson, 2008). It is also one domain, among many, where males are taken as the universal subject. For example, in football the men's world cup is called, 'the world cup', whereas the women's is gendered as 'the women's world cup' (Engh, 2011). Gender segregation has supported the hegemonic position of masculine superiority. For men, research has demonstrated that participation in all male sports enables them to secure their position as the universal subject, as the embodiment of 'sport' as a masculine, competitive, aggressive contest (Anderson, 2008; Woodward, 2009). While for women, segregation has provided a space away from male aggression and violence on the field (Theberge, 1987) as well as greater control of sport more generally (Hargreaves, 1990).

Despite some of the benefits of segregated sport for women, scholars such as Hargreaves (1990) have noted the ways that separatism makes damaging assumptions about biologically determined reasons for male domination and fails to account for the fluid and changing gender relations in sport. More recently, researchers such as Anderson (2008), Pfister (2011) and Channon and Jennings (2013) have written about the benefits of sex integration as a way for people of different genders to learn more about the embodied capacities of all. And so, the introduction of men, as active participants in roller derby, presents an important and potentially productive opportunity for both men and women to learn about each other, and to challenge outdated notions of sex and gender.

The question of gender in contemporary research has developed extensively, particularly since the integration of poststructuralist and inter/transdisciplinary concepts began to influence the field. In a turn away from structuralist notions of depth, the primacy of the mind, and 'reading' gender, feminist research has worked to incorporate corporality (Grosz, 1994) and a conception of 'the body' as processual, fluid and becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In the case of roller derby, Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) have begun to incorporate these ideas into their analysis, allowing them to theorise the multiple identities of women in derby. Relationships among women have tended to fall into a few categories – friendships, sisterhood, mean girls, and so on (Ringrose, 20016). Pavlidis and Fullagar's (2014) work drew on feminist conceptualizations of affect to go beyond these narrow categories of what women in sport can be. This current chapter, while acknowledging these theoretical debates, is primarily empirical and focused on the specifics of sex integrated roller derby. In the following section we present our methods, followed by a background to roller derby (and roller skating) and gender. Then we present an outline of some of the

institutional issues related to gender that impact the sport. This leads onto our analysis of key themes that were found through the research, followed by the conclusion.

Collaborative, reflexive ethnography in mixed sex/gender derby

This chapter is one of the first analyses (see also, Pavlidis & Connor, 2015) of mixed gender roller derby in the academic field and therefore takes an exploratory and ethnographic approach. Mixed derby has no governing body or rules framework, although most leagues follow the rule set of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA, discussed below). A point of contention within sex integrated leagues is how to manage the gender mix of skaters on track both during training and bouts, as well as the gender mix in leadership positions. Thus we take mixed derby to be any league/bout that explicitly incorporates a range of genders *on the track* and allows them to skate together. Incorporating 'brief ethnographic visits' (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002), together with auto-ethnographic research sustained over longer periods of time, our methodological approach is eclectic¹ (Wheaton, 2013). We use a range of data collection methods common to sport ethnographies, including participant observation (in 'real' and virtual spaces), informal conversations, in-depth interviews and analysis of blog content and official website text.

Mixed sex/gender roller derby is a contentious issue. A reflexive ethnographic approach, sensitive to the complexities of power and gender in roller derby, has been employed to ensure an ethical and productive analysis. The first author, who self-identifies as cisfemale, is an ex-roller derby participant. The second author self-identifies as cismale and is currently participating in roller derby in a mixed sex/gender league. Women have written most of the literature about the contemporary

¹ See Pavlidis & Connor, 2015

revival of roller derby, with the exception being Travis Beaver (2012). This chapter contributes towards collaborative, mixed sex/gender ethnographic research in action sport. As derby skaters (past and present), we have (varying degrees) of 'intimate insider' (Taylor, 2011) knowledge of roller derby in Australia. Notions of 'insider' and 'outsider' positions in ethnographic research have been problematised over the years, and particularly when it comes to gender, this area is only beginning to be interrogated by researchers (Olive and Thorpe, 2011; Pavlidis and Olive, 2013). In this chapter we argue that 'insider research' can be rigorous while also acknowledging the fluid boundaries of identity and belonging that typify contemporary life. Our collective goal is to sensitively examine the tensions created by mixed sex/gender roller derby and to argue for mixed sex/gender derby as an important step forward for the sport.

Roller derby – changing gender relations

Roller derby is one action sport where women have always had a central role as participants. Indeed, roller *skating* itself has been one leisure pursuit where women have enjoyed themselves since as early as the late 17th Century. Storms, in her archival research on roller skating in the United States of America found that,

During the 1890s, there were rinks with hard maple floors in nearly every town and city and roller skating became a social craze. Young Victorian women had a rare glimpse of freedom as they met and socialized with men during these skating events because their chaperones could not keep up with them on skates. (2008: 69)

The sport of roller derby was said to be invented first as a type of marathon on roller skates in the 1920s, and women were able to compete in the early days of the sport's

development in mixed gender races. Storms' found that 'These women athletes were not only competitive, but shocked and astonished the crowds at the race with their skill and previously unforeseen athleticism' (2008: 75). By the end of World War II roller derby developed from the marathon style races, to incorporate elements of faux fighting and a more developed points system. With the birth of television, derby's popularity grew exponentially, and Storms found evidence to suggest that the female skaters were key to this popularity. A sports reporter in 1949 wrote,

Actually it is the girls who save roller derby from being a bore. Such worthies as Mary Lou Palermo, Annis 'Red' Jensen, Mary Ciafano, Monta Jean Schall, Gerorgiana Kemp, Gertie Schall, and the aforementioned 'Toughie' Brasuhn have the temperament and dash to keep the crowds awake. Hair pulling, fist fights, gestures, and plain yells of anguish are in their bag of tricks' (Gould 1949 in Storms, 2008: 76)

Women in derby were seen as tough, strong and athletic. Yet, despite the central importance of women in derby, there were still discrepancies in pay – with male players being paid more than the females, despite their performance. Various iterations of roller derby attempted to enter into the sport landscape in the period between 1970- 1990, yet none of those survive today.

Early this century the sport of roller derby undertook an 'all girl revival' (Mabe, 2008). This revived version privileged women's participation, as players and leaders. As a contact sport played on roller skates, where women would often wear sexualized uniforms including short skirts/shorts and fishnet stockings and take on a moniker, for example Al-pocalypse, or Barilyn Monroe (Two Evils, n.d.), roller derby has been celebrated as a site of empowerment and sporting success for women around the world (Beaver, 2012; Finley, 2010).

So far, there have been several research articles published that examine and explain gender in roller derby. Predominately, and clearly demonstrated through the work of Finley (2010), Carlson (2010) and Donnelly (2012), gender has been understood via Connell's concept of a gender regime – 'the pattering of gender relations in [an] institution, and especially the continuing pattern, which provides the structural context of particular relationships and individual practices' (Connell, 2005: 4). This work has focused on types of 'alternative' femininity that roller derby enables. Other researchers, such as Pavlidis (2011) and Breeze (2013) draw on poststructuralist theories, such as those articulated by Law (2004) and Foucault (1980), to understand the gender relations at play. This approach focuses on areas often thought of as 'periphery' in research—such as the question of seriousness at the heart of Breeze's (2013) work, or the privileging of affect and music in some of Pavlidis' work (for example, 2011). The literature so far on roller derby has focused primarily on women's participation and relations with each other, not on their relations with men or broader structures in society (see Beaver, 2012 for a Marxist account of derby organisations). This focus on women was perhaps inevitable and in keeping with the all girl revival mantra. While this approach offers a range of insights into female sport, what it misses is the wider context of roller derby and how it operates within a sporting system that is signified as masculine. The sport struggles with its position in regards to the role of men and how it paradoxically embraces traditional sporting mantras (e.g. professionalism, sponsorship, athleticism, centralized control) and revolutionary aspects (the primacy of women over men).

Institutional gender relations

As roller derby continues to gain popularity, there remains contestation over issues of national and international governance (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014: 111-153). The largest governing body, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), is, as their name suggests, a majority women's only organisation, promoting a majority women's only sport. Yet, as noted above, separatism in sport (as in other areas of life), has not addressed issues of sexism, discrimination, and marginalization. And, more importantly, the idea of 'women' as a coherent category has undergone rigorous critique (for example, Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994). The idea that any one woman in sport can speak for all women has been contested (Brown, 2011; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013; Watson & Scraton, 2012), and it is more widely accepted that women, like men, have multiple and sometimes competing desires, motivations, and (sexual) preferences.

This being the case, WFTDA's focus on 'women's roller derby', while also positioning itself as the authority in the development of rules, structure and future directions of the sport are somewhat problematic. Since the initial revival of roller derby, men have had and continue to have important support roles as coaches, referees and non-skating officials. Men also play roller derby, with a Men's Roller Derby Association (MRDA) recently established (based in the US). Of primary interest in this chapter is the way that mixed gender leagues have begun establishing themselves. These men's leagues, and, in particular the mixed gender leagues, pose a challenge to the mission of WFTDA, and to the notion of 'woman' as a coherent, unified category, and requires a more complex interrogation of the gender dynamics at play (at local and global levels), to which this chapter contributes.

In the early 2000s a revived version of derby, played solely by women, came to the media's attention (Ray, 2008). Since then, with varying levels of organisation

and structure, the sport has continued to grow and gain popularity around the world. Although there are no 'official' statistics to demonstrate the growth of roller derby, there are several unofficial ways of measuring growth. For example, the international master list of roller derby names, which aims to ensure that each player has a unique name and 'inactive' skaters are removed, cites 40,542 rollergirls as of 9 January 2014 (www.twoevils.org/rollergirls/), compared to 7,927 female skaters that were registered in April 2007 (Storms, 2010). In 2014 there are approximately 1,515 leagues around the world, as compared with the approximately 50 leagues that were established by 2006 (www.derbyroster.com). There are nine separate associations supporting the sport's governance and development (JRDA = Junior Roller Derby Association; MADE = Modern Athletic Derby Endeavor; MRDA = Men's Roller Derby Association; OSDA = Old School Derby Association; RDAC = Roller Derby Association of Canada; RDCL = Roller Derby Coalition of Leagues; UKRDA = United Kingdom Roller Derby Association; USARS = USA Roller Sports; WFTDA = Women's Flat Track Derby Association), however only the WFTDA deliberately positions itself as a women's governing body, while also asserting its claim as the 'original' and authoritative body. Yet WFTDA has only 260 Full Member Leagues and 97 Apprentice Leagues (www.wftda.com/leagues); a small proportion of the 1,510 leagues around the world. WFTDA's primary claim to universal legitimacy is that (with the exclusion of banked track leagues) a large proportion of leagues and associations use their rules for games.

Problematically the WFTDA reproduces dominant narratives regarding the category of 'Woman' as defined against 'man', via biological determinism. To skate in a WFTDA (2014) league a skater must be 'living as a woman and having sex

hormones that are within the medically acceptable range for a female'. Conversely, and somewhat non-typically for a Men's sporting organization, the MRDA (2014),

...does not and will not differentiate between members who identify male and those who identify as a nonbinary gender (including but not limited to genderqueer, transmasculine, transfeminine, and agender) and does not and will not set minimum standards of masculinity for its membership or interfere with the privacy of its members for the purposes of charter eligibility.

In relation to the policy, in our interview with the MRDA President, he noted that 'the essence of what it was designed to achieve was to give skaters who don't identify with a binary gender a place to compete in roller derby as long as they are committed to playing what we call men's roller derby'.

The history and practice of gender verification in sport is one of invasive medicalization of socially construed gender binaries that have profoundly discriminated against athletes (Henne, 2014). It must be noted that this type of sex verification only occurs in Women's sport and is often based around a perception that a person cannot be female because of the way they 'look' (Vannini and Fornssler 2011). The reliance on hormones and medical verification leads to egregious breaches of a person's rights and privacy as noted by Henne (2014) and Schultz (2011) in other sports with such rules.

Playing together: Don't be a douche, be a gentleman

Roller derby is a contact sport, played on roller skates. Players need to be able to skate well, and need to be able to give, and take, full body hits (in 'legal' areas, including hips, backside, shoulders, chest and thighs). The 'jammers' are the point scorers in the game and are often the most skilled and fast skaters. 'Blockers' are

focused more on strategy and blocking the other team from scoring points – strength as well as skill is valued in this role. As a contact sport there are co-ed leagues in Australia with informal rules and limits around what men can do against women. This includes the strength of and number of hits, who can make them against whom and restrictions on employing valid derby tactics so as to not 'demoralise' the women skaters. However, the skaters acknowledged that these norms of play were a constant source of tension. In our interview with the president of one such league we asked about the ways these informal rules work.

Participant: Okay it all depends on the league in question. If it's an opposing large male blocker – most co-ed leagues run by what we call the Gentlemen's Code, which is the guys skate 100 percent impact against each other and they aim for positional blocking or needed force to push a female opponent down or out, not what we would call excessive. I know the rules don't account for anything such as excessive, but no one likes to see a small 55 kilo woman splayed across the wall by a 90 kilo man on skates.

So we teach skaters from the get-go to apply the force you need as a male skater, rather than what you don't need. When large guys lay smaller girls out intentionally, you'll find the crowd and stuff like that will get quite behind them and be like that's a dick move, not very cool. If we saw that repeatedly happening in [our league] we'd probably crush that out, because that's not part of our culture; we don't allow for that.

Interviewer: You don't have any women who object to that though; because it's basically saying women aren't strong enough to be on the track?

Participant: That's a very good point. It is often the coaches that are raising the issue far more than the skaters. I honestly have actually never had a female say that someone in our league has used excessive force to the point where they're caused serious physical harm against them; I've never had that complaint. I've had that complaint from other leagues from my skaters on opposing skaters from other leagues, but never from within [the league].

Another male skater, from a different league reflected on the problem of being the big, harder-hitting one on the track dealing with less advanced female skaters:

Interviewee: It's a different type of enjoyment. I have to play differently. If I'm jamming, there are blockers who are half my weight trying to stop me and so I don't want to injure people. I don't want to 'be a douche', as the saying goes.

Interviewer: Don't be a douche?

Interviewee: Which is never actually articulated except at the time when you do something that someone doesn't like and they claim that you're breaking this rule. But also I'm trying to extract value from training and just being, like,

this blocker his half my weight therefore I win is actually not a useful kind of way for me to train.

Interviewer: So could you describe, then, playing against other men what that experience is like?

Interviewee: I guess I get a real sense of the only limitations being the rules. And my own capacity, and there's some kind of liberation in that that particularly because those rules are articulated, whereas in co-ed play there's always that, yes, that block was legal, but you're probably a bad person for doing it and often you get the everyone says I've signed up for this, I'm here voluntarily, if you follow the rules then that's all right, but then they still get ... you still get the impression they believe you've committed an injustice, even where your actions were within the rules.

These responses were typical of many of the male identified skaters who we engaged with through the research. These kinds of views, about the need for men to 'hold back' and limit themselves when playing against women confirm and reinforce narrowly defined gender norms. Yet, as noted above by one of the participants, these types of informal policies were supported by some female skaters.

Don't be a douche & don't hold back

The phrase 'don't be a douche' is commonly used during mixed games/training to suggest that men should not be 'mean' or 'hard' about their blocking against women, and should not take advantage of their perceived superior

size/weight and hitting power. This assumption of superiority in sport is what is at stake in the deployment of the phrase 'don't be a douche'. In the field of recreational surfing, Olive, McCuaig and Phillips (2012) found male patronage and 'helping' behavior in the surf – such as pushing a women onto a wave without her request – can be deeply offensive and sometimes patronizing, indicating as it does that women are weaker and inferior.

We also found that many women feel deeply insulted by the idea of men 'holding back' their hits or not playing properly as highlighted by one of our female participants below.

Interviewer: Do you think men should play 'softer' against women?

Participant: Bullshit, I find it really offensive that some men and women still see us as soft or weak. It's Derby, you get better by being hit hard. That said, sometimes some women will complain and bitch about the guys being too big or strong cause they can't get through [the pack – past the men] or something, and that makes us all [women] look bad. (Female skater, co-ed league)

The MRDA president also acknowledged that 'don't be a douche' wasn't always taken well by players.

I've seen the same ethic cause offense- where its being explained before a co-ed scrimmage, and some skaters like having everyone reminded not to be a douche, and others get offended and say 'I don't want anyone to skate different with me than they would with anyone'.

Further, as Rider, a female skater/blogger (2014) notes: 'And if you don't want to play with men because you think they're too aggressive and hit too hard, then please,

for the love of God, make sure you avoid ever playing any high-level women's derby.' This sentiment was repeatedly echoed in informal discussion around the problem of men hitting women – most female skaters characterised it as weakness on the part of the skater. A female participant, mother to two young children, with post-graduate education, gave the following extended response to the specific question about men playing roller derby:

Interviewee: it doesn't bother me, to be honest, I mean, our first bout [match] with [the league] was a co-ed bout... two male bouters [skaters] ...were both put on the same team... and they absolutely hammered us, you know it was a slaughter, and I realised as well, during the game, that they had been holding back in training, you know, cause they hit so hard, it was like, the first time it was a real shock, like 'oh my god, I've never been hit that hard' you know, so, but it was still fun, and I would still do it again.

Some men in our research questioned the universalizing of gendered strength/power/skill, with one male skater noting, 'some women are 'far more scary' than the blokes' (usually in reference to more experienced female skaters). As Channon and Jennings (2013: 488) note 'feminist scholars have explored mixed-sex participation, suggesting that personal empowerment, along with broader challenges to hierarchal gender discourse, can be strengthened immensely when men and women jointly experience the potentials of differently sexed bodies'. However, exposure may also serve to cement and enforce ideas of gender as the protagonists struggle to negotiate/live the mixed sporting experience. Some men in our research refused to engage in co-ed scrimmage/contact on the basis of not wanting to 'hurt the girls'. This discourse of 'weakness' is exemplified by the idea that men should 'pull'

their hits on women to not hurt them. A number of discussions reflect this masculine/feminine binary, including the idea that men are pre-disposed to be more aggressive and violent and thus hit harder.

The phrase, 'don't be a douche' had a different, perhaps more productive institutional meaning in the context of the MRDA. When asked whether he was familiar with the refrain, the president of MRDA responded by utilizing a similar term 'rule zero' (zero, indicating that it is not actually a rule which are all numbered from 1.0 onwards),

Ahhh yes, the good old 'Rule Zero'. The efficacy depends on the setting. In an all-league practice where we have people of all skill levels from 'I just passed my minimum skills' to 'I just completed by 6th season on a travel team', then its absolutely necessary. The [US regional league] girls have developed a skating levels system which has been really helpful to identify what each skater should be able to 'handle', and in an effort to make things as seamless as possible between the leagues, The [male league] have adopted it as well. It spells out skill benchmarks for each level which correspond to a color stripe (red, orange, yellow, none) that's visible to other skaters. So for instance, no one hits someone with a red stripe on their helmet. But no color at all means you're travel team eligible and can take anything, in theory, so its open game on you. What this means is that you can't claim someone did something wrong if they were within the bounds of the levels system.

In this way we can see how some leagues are attempting to remove gender (as a restricting qualifier) and replace it with a somewhat quantitative measure of skill and ability. Rather than group skaters according to gender, instead there is a move to

group skaters according to skill level. As he says, by skaters wearing colours that represent their skill level, and hence what is the appropriate strength to use on them, then 'you can't claim someone did something wrong if they were within the bounds of the level system'.

Conclusion

Derby is far from a utopian gender space, or perhaps even a neutral one with this research demonstrating the on-going sexualisation of skaters and the re-iteration of weakness and sporting inferiority via being 'soft' on participants sexed as female. As a male observer commented in an opinion piece in a major Australian online news source:

Perhaps what is required is respect of the gender politics in which roller derby is engaged. Men's roller derby is an opportunity for men to move into a woman's space – at the invite, essentially, of women. And in doing so men who play roller derby have the opportunity to show the rest of the world how men can be willing to play on women's terms, accept women as key leaders and allow themselves to play second fiddle to the women's game. (Copland, 2014)

The contested nature of men in roller derby illustrates the construed and performative nature of the tension. As one derby skater put it in a blog post,

I am female, I am a skater in a co-ed league and every time I see or hear a rant bemoaning men playing derby and citing feminism as the reason, I feel like smashing my head against a wall. (Rider, 2014)

The first author's experiences, skating with an all female league and conducting research with mostly all female leagues, highlighted the problematic denial of the role of men in derby. Men's involvement, as referees, coaches, partners, supporters and fans was often not accounted for (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014) and in this way, women's position as 'empowered' was sometimes undermined by the lack of transparency and openness to (gendered) differences. Another female skater, commenting on the idea that men should not play noted: 'How can we be feminist and empowering and all that good Derby stuff when we exclude people based on gender?'

The second author's experiences highlighted the challenges in negotiating gender and sexuality in mixed derby. In the masculine space of martial arts, Channon and Jennings (2013) noted the ways women and men were able to 'de-sexualise' themselves (to a greater or lesser extent) in the training environment (it is rare for women to fight men competitively). In roller derby, as a primarily female space where emphasized femininity is the norm (including wearing revealing clothing, heavy make-up, and the adoption of sometimes sexualized monikers as derby names) this is more complex.

Gender is an on-going area of contention in derby. The position of authority claimed by WFTDA is making it difficult for leagues that wish to be co-ed and/or non-gendered to establish themselves and compete. Especially as WFTDA has created structural constraints, via their rules, on what genders can play derby. Despite its potential, derby does reproduce and reflect dominant gendered discourses about appearance, bodies, strength and power and skaters are sexualized. These interactions occur from the policy level to everyday interactions of skaters and without further interrogation may impede the growth and success of the sport. The imperative and instruction to not 'be a douche[bag]' is deployed in a number of ways, some

productive of more inclusive gender relations, and some that limit the possibilities inherent in sex integrated roller derby. Common as the phrase is, its meaning is highly dependent on context and understanding.

Cohen's point at the beginning of this chapter, that the douchebag is the 'white racial slur we have all been waiting for' (Cohen, 2014) fails to account for the ways slurs such as these can work *against* marginalized group. Of course, Cohen was simply using the example of the douchebag as part of a teaching exercise, but his students' responses and agreements are notable. And in derby, name-calling and the use of the phrase 'don't be a douche' is considered part of the culture. Further research about the gender dynamics in roller derby needs to seriously consider the ways these types of slurs undermine the feminist ethos of roller derby more generally. As Michael Flood notes in relation to the rise of men's movements, 'because men in general are privileged in relation to gender, their collective mobilization involves the danger of enhancing this privilege' (2007, 420). The use of slurs, in what nearly all male participants agree is primarily *a women's space*, is not only unnecessary but could also be damaging for the sport more broadly.

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