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Title

Men in a “women only” sport? Contesting gender relations and sex integration in roller derby.

Abstract

Roller derby is a growing, popular sport, where teams compete on roller skates, and where rules allow “blocking” and full body contact. Roller derby is primarily played by women, with men restricted to support roles during its revival stage in the early 2000s. However, men and gender diverse skaters are increasingly playing the sport, in mixed / co-ed leagues and Men’s teams. This has created deep divisions within the derby community regarding the role of men in a women’s space and the playing of a full contact sport with men against women on the track. The tensions within derby highlight the wider gendered problems in sport regarding perceptions of athletic ability, strength and capability. Drawing on an ethnographic methodology, we present a range of perspectives from derby players and counter-point their lived experiences with the structural constraints on gender enforced by the governing bodies with the sport Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) and Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA). We explicitly engage from a radically inclusive position inspired by Hargreaves’ (1990) call for sport to challenge gendered notions of capability.

Key words: gender; sport; sex integration; roller derby;

Introduction

“I’m not doing full game practice if there are men involved... I’m scared of it”

(Female participant from a mixed league)

The above quote was from a female derby player who was part of our research. As a member of a mixed league, she was clearly against mixed practice and this quote illustrates some of the key tensions we address via a qualitative methodology. The place of men in roller derby is a deeply contentious issue. Men’s role in the sport, as teammates, as support and officials, and as members of their own men’s leagues has not been interrogated in detail, despite the growing body of work written on women and roller derby. As with netball in the 1920s and 30s, many roller derby leagues have adhered to “majority women” governance policies to ensure men do not “take over” (see Tagg, [2014] for a history of men in netball). Women in roller derby are passionate about the sport and feel a strong sense of belonging and ownership (Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014) and this sometimes translates into a sense of gender exclusivity and a feeling that men are “invading” or “encroaching” on women’s space. Yet men are involved. They play, coach, referee, and provide input into all areas of the sport and pretending they don’t will not work – as one contributor noted “men are here to stay” (female participant, Women only league).

Since the early 2000s a revived flat track version of roller derby has gained popularity, after the spectacularised banked track version fell out of fashion in the 1980s. This revival of roller derby was led by women and the sport has since become known as a “women-only” space (Donnelly 2012). Often espoused as a “feminist” sport, researchers such as Finley (2010) in the United States, argue that the sport is

empowering and enables the disruption of conventional definitions of femininity. However, there tends to be an uncritical hagiography of roller derby in both academic and populist publications, often espoused via the derby mantra of “derby saved my life” (Leon 2007). Most research on the topic of roller derby is hopeful about the sport’s potential, particularly in relation to supporting alternative femininities and opportunities for women (as noted by Beave, 2012; Breeze 2013; Carlson 2010; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014; Peluso 2011; Storms 2008). There are only limited critiques of derby as a feminist endeavor and whether it actually can be a space of liberation and challenge to gender norms remains unclear (for example, Cohen 2008).

One means of critically re-dressing the analysis of derby is to incorporate an account of men in the sport. Although, both Donnelly (2012) and Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) do make some forays into the position of men, it is not the core of their work. This, increasingly large, gap in the literature is what this current article aims to address. It does so through incorporating both textual information, found mainly online (news outlets, official roller derby websites, social media sites, popular blogs), as well as ethnographic material and interviews with key stakeholders. Because the academic literature has not yet provided an account of men in roller derby, this article illustrates both the macro and micro level issues that have unfolded as men’s participation in roller derby has developed through the years. This article is written with the critiques of sport sociology of Zirin (2008) and Eckstein, Moss, and Delaney (2010) in mind, in that we aim for it to “be more relevant, more accessible, and more public” (Zirin 2008, 2). Zirin (2008, 2) quotes Rich King, the former president of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, who states, “many sociologists of sport want to do more than simply make observations or apply esoteric theories. They direct their work to have an impact on sport. They hope to

challenge and change sport and society”. In that vein, we connect our experiences, with those of research subjects further enhanced via secondary sources to take a micro-macro approach to the vexed question of sport, woman, men and derby. We propose that the rigid conceptualisations of gender as a binary are deeply problematic yet consistently reproduced with derby. This is exemplified via the imaginary construction of men in derby as “big”, “strong” and “tough” which is not (often) the reality, with all types of body shapes represented across the gender spectrum. Indeed, projects such as The Rollergirl Project specifically seek to show the range of bodies/genders within the derby community to demonstrate diversity (Layman 2015; Erbentraut 2015).

After the background and methods section which follows, empirical material from Australia and the United States from key governing bodies is presented that outlines some of the “official” views in relation to men and gender more broadly in roller derby. This is followed by some of the polarized views that were found through our research and go to the core of issues of gender and inclusion in sport. This leads to our concluding discussion and points towards areas of future research.

Background

In her 2014 article on mixed sport competition, Pam Sailors begins with a quote from John Stuart Mill taken from *The Subjection of Women*:

What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing. What they can do, but not so well as the men who are their competitors, competition suffices to exclude them from; since nobody asks for protective duties and bounties in favor of women; it is only asked that the present bounties and protective duties in favor of men should be recalled (Mill, 1869 in Sailors, 2014, 65)

This view, invoked in the 1800s, persists today. As Lorber noted in 1993, in sport “physiological differences are invoked to justify women’s secondary status, despite

the clear evidence that gender status overrides physiological capabilities” (571). Women’s sport has always (and largely continues to be) classified as “less than” – less hard, strong, tough, fast, and crucially in the increasingly commercialized sporting world, less watchable and therefore profit making. The Legends Football League, previously the Lingerie Football League, is a women’s sport that has gained considerable commercial success. Yet despite the opportunities it presents for women to engage in tough and skillful competition, there are some major issues in the ways it represents women in very narrow terms: white, slim, heterosexual, and with little variation in terms of facial features and hair (Khomutova and Channon 2015).

Even as “new” sports have become more accessible and culturally sensitive to women’s participation (such as roller derby, triathlon and crossfit), there remains a constant comparison to “men’s sport”. Coupled to this over-arching conception of “less” are a panoply of constraints to women’s and girls’ participation in sport and physical activities, including specific issues around body image (Johns and Johns 2000), sexism (Fink 2014), income (McKay 1991), capacity (Young 2005) and most importantly, cultural and ideological norms pertaining to the abilities of and possibilities for women (for example, Clasen 2001; Chase 2006; Cronan and Scott 2008).

In her seminal paper on some of the responses to these “problems” for women in sport, Jennifer Hargreaves (1990) pointed towards the potential of mixed sport, that is, sport played by both women and men (girls and boys) in the same team as well as competing against each other. By examining some of the theoretical positions characteristic of sports feminist writing at the time, she extrapolates an explicitly revolutionist argument for a focus on gender *relations*, rather than simply gender differences. She writes,

As in other areas of life, in sport there are numerous, different male/female relationships and situations where sex and sexuality, as well as, for example, ethnicity, class and age are unimportant. In some contexts women are unequivocally subordinated in their relationships with men, in other situations women collude in apparently subordinate roles, in some spheres women share power with men and have greater autonomy than in the past, and in a limited number of situations women wield power over men. (Hargreaves 1990, 294)

Her argument is that a radically different model of sport is needed where women participate in “a co-operative venture with men for qualitative new models in which differences [between] the sexes are unimportant” (302). At the same time she notes that this idea “tends to remain at the level of theoretical discourse and is seldom put into practice...it is an idea which has never been treated seriously by those who are in entrenched positions of power in sport and resistant to fundamental change” (301).

This comment, made in 1990, maintains its relevancy, as sports still struggle to address the ongoing issues of sexism, discrimination and unnecessary violence and corruption (on and off the field). There has been some critical literature written about “new” sports that might provide a space for more inclusive and productive gender relations (Channon 2012; Channon and Jennings 2013; Cohen, Brown, and Peachey 2012; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014). And also limited research has been undertaken on more “traditional” sports such as equestrian (Dashper 2012) and mixed-doubles tennis (Lake 2012) where gender relations are visible and ongoing. Yet so far, Hargreaves’ call for a fundamentally different model of sport where sexual difference is unimportant has not been fulfilled. The current debates around gender identity and hormonal/physical differences in terms of who can compete in “male” and “female” sport indicate that we have made little progress on the equality project (Henne 2014). This potential however, for a “new” model of sport, remains.

Roller Derby

Over the past decade roller derby has emerged on the sport landscape and has been sometimes been put forward as “revolutionary” – with the mantra of ‘by the skaters - for the skaters’ evoking political revolutionary tropes. Indeed, the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association’s (WFTDA) stated values are “Real, Strong, Athletic, Revolutionary” (WFTDA 2015), almost the opposite to the popular conception of women in sport. Roller derby is a contact sport, and has some affinities with music subcultures such as punk, rockabilly, rock and burlesque. Its history is connected with rock n wrestling as a professional, televised, and staged sport, yet its future seems much different.

Donnelly’s (2012) work in derby and other spaces, such as home improvement workshops, focuses on the construction of “women only” spaces as relational and in opposition to men and male spaces. These spaces are construed via essentialist ideal types of gender, where femininity is defined against masculinity in a binary set. Donnelly identifies two women structured discourses, one of “sisterhood” and “one of mean girls” – either the interactions are nice, emotional, supportive; or they are nasty, competitive and sexually charged. She found that it was often essentialist notions of gender that were used to justify the women only spaces. Men are constrained in Donnelly’s derby analysis by being limited to support roles, thus allowing women to define the space by limiting the involvement of men to the role of adjunct. Thus men can never challenge the assumed gendered authority of women skaters. Donnelly rightly notes that the “women only” nature of derby is merely a reproduction of essential binaries and the assumed need to gender segregate in sport. Her research, conducted between 2008 – 2012, enabled a particular type of analysis; roller derby was just gaining momentum around the globe and the role of men was still marginal. For us, writing and researching roller derby in 2015, we are able to look back on the

rapid development of the sport and document some of the challenges and positive outcomes of the changing gender relations and dynamics of the sport.

Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014), too, noted the complexity of mixed gender leagues, despite the focus of their research being on women’s experiences. Their research, based in Australia, found sex-integrated leagues and teams to espouse more open and inclusive gender perceptions (both at micro and macro levels), including the acceptance of trans and non-gender identified skaters in their leagues. They also found a suspicious and fixed position expressed by many women, particularly in the more competitive leagues, as they felt threatened and protective of roller derby – a sport they had come to love and find a strong sense of belonging within. The love and belonging experienced by many women in Pavlidis and Fullagar’s research is important to note in our current research into sex-integrated leagues/teams. Ensuring roller derby puts the bodies of women at its centre is part of what Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) argue needs to be part of a new derby ethos as the sport continues to grow, become more competitive and professional, and as men’s role in the sport increases. The question of *how* to keep women’s bodies central – while being an inclusive space for all genders – is one that this paper contributes towards.

Methodology

As researchers we have come together because of our differing subject positions in an attempt to address the failure of the literature to interrogate mixed derby. The first author identifies as female, and is an ex-roller derby player and has been engaged in research about roller derby for several years. Her theoretical perspective draws on a post-structural feminist trajectory and is explicitly interdisciplinary – with insights from cultural studies, sociology, and leisure studies

forming the basis of her work. With a focus on the sensual, affective aspects of roller derby, the first author views the sport as a complex terrain where women can experiment with their selves and indeed the notion of femininity.

The second author identifies as male and currently plays roller derby in a mixed gender league. He started skating to avoid the “derby widow” phenomenon and support his partner in the sport – a very common trajectory for men in derby. His background is as an emotions researcher (Connor 2007) who looked at sporting fandom and has branched out into sport issues more generally but with a focus on doping and regulation. He theoretically tends to mix a Marxist and symbolic interactionist perspectives to be deeply critical of the structures of sporting activity while acknowledging its experienced purpose (and perceived value) for those involved.

It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt to resolve our different theoretical perspectives and understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality. Indeed this is a wider project that sport sociology is making some forays into each year and is one in which sociology more broadly attempts to address. Instead, what we provide is a collaborative ethnography, illuminating important perspectives on mixed gender roller derby in an Australian context, partly informed by that difference. We have come together to gain a fuller understanding of the challenges the sport is facing as it grows and gains popularity. In doing so we hope to illuminate some areas that might be improved, or at the least made more transparent as the sport grows. This also provides insight to sport sociologists, as nowhere else is a women’s sport rapidly growing into a mixed sport with the concomitant issues – providing a rich field of data on gender and sport. Some of the material presented below is controversial, however, we must give voice to these views and only by examining them we might find a way through

for people of all genders to continue to enjoy roller derby. We are not “preaching to the converted”, but instead we are entering into a conversation, suspending judgment, and participating in an act of openness.

This methodical approach requires a suspension of judgment and a rejection of any fixed position or “truth”, while accounting for particular assumptions about gender and sport. Both researchers assume that most participants in roller derby, regardless of gender, would like to continue their participation. We both assume that the violence of a full contact sport (on eight wheels) is an attraction for people of all genders who choose to participate. And we both assume that gender is socially constructed, and that not all aspects of gender are constraining or limiting and that both femininity and masculinity has both damaging and liberating aspects that can be negotiated and influenced in a range of ways (Butler 1990).

Drawing on the methodological traditions of ethnography, our particular methods for collecting research material included participant observation, interviews (with representatives from the Men’s Roller Derby Association, Roller Derby Australia, and a number of skaters of varied gender/sexual preferences), and what is sometimes called “virtual ethnography”, observing blogs and social media sites that are in the public domain. The first author used her field notes from participating in roller derby 2010 – 2013, and the second author recorded his field notes through 2014- 2015.

The authors undertook both purposive sampling to target specific people in high profile or leadership positions within leagues as well as random/emergent sampling of skaters who they came into contact with. This ensured a representative sampling of the views of skaters. The issues discussed in the paper were discussed with 30 people across a range of leagues at numerous events/games in Australia.

Secondary source material was sourced via key word internet searches and by cascade link following. All material, including interviews and relevant text found online, was read through by both authors and key areas of discussion are provided below. As very little has been written about mixed gender roller derby the article does provide substantial description to set the scenes and engage the debates in sufficient detail to allow theoretical contributions in future research.

Gender policies and trends

Roller derby is currently confronting a number of tensions as it attempts to expand and professionalise. Some of these tensions are common to all sports and some are specific to derby because of its unique position within the sporting landscape. The tensions that are all too common in marginal/alternative sport are funding (Turner 2013), publicity/media coverage (Messner 2002), facility access (Rafoss and Troelsen 2010) and maintaining a critical mass to support suppliers and maintain enough competition. More peculiar to derby is the negotiation of gender and its development as a “women’s only” space (Donnelly 2012). As a women’s sport, roller derby has, since its reinvention in the early 2000s, privileged the sensual and visual aspects of sport, alongside competition, skill and strength (Kearney 2011; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014). As a sport that proudly presents its radical, punk, alternative, queer friendly and female controlled position as a great advantage, roller derby is certainly not a utopian space for women. As Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) note, there is a dark side to belonging and the relationships between women cannot be assumed to be always positive as they have different needs, desires and skills. And also, importantly to this

article, men have always been and remain key elements to the sport (initially as support people) and their participation is continuing to grow.

As men’s participation in the sport grows, with men’s and sex integrated leagues developing around the globe, gender policies are being highlighted as important artefacts for understanding. The WFTDA, despite professing to be a radically inclusive organization, maintains the same deeply problematic biological distinctions of male and female “sex” as defined by a person’s body as most organised sports. As of June 2015 the WFTDA gender policy as listed on its website requires that all skaters be living as a female, clarifying this with the requirement that an: “athlete’s sex hormones are within the medically acceptable range for a female”. This must be verified by a medical practitioner. This sort of sex testing/verification has been discredited by the medical and socio-medical literature as absolutist, binary manufacturing and all-encompassing. Most damning is that it assumes that hormones defines gender and does not take not account the myriad of variations in the expression of human gender and sex (Koh, Adair, and Sonksen 2014).

In a public blog post titled “time for the Bleeding Heartland Roller Girls to protest the WFTDA gender policy”, Jacob, a skater who self-identifies as queer, outlines her views on the problems with WFTDA’s gender policies. Jake writes,

I would be ineligible according to the WFTDA policies. This is because I am not living as a female—I identify as genderqueer, and many of my friends refer to me as “Jake” and use male pronouns to refer to me. Additionally, several of my friends—many of whom skate for various roller derby teams—have hormone levels that are outside of the “normal” female range. They are cisgendered females, living as women, but would be disqualified to skate under WFTDA policies (McWilliams 2012)

This example is an important one as it illustrates a range of issues, including self-identification, and biologically determinate markers of gender exclusion. It should also be noted that there is opposition from within Women’s teams to this particular

policy, for example, in response to “Jake” above: “I love roller derby and I love skating with one of the top-ranked WFTDA leagues in the entire world, but WFTDA’s gender policy needs to be changed. Especially because we gain nothing from following the Olympic policy on eligibility and just make everyone angry (myself included)” (Tremaine 2015). This comment, made by a blogger and transgender skater, who identifies as female and *does* meet WFTDA’s gender policy requirement, speaks to the need for work in this area. What is striking is that such a queer/alternative friendly sport would be so deterministic about what constitutes a “woman”.

There are some derby groups that explicitly celebrate their diversity, for example the Vagine Regime, a group of skaters that expressly celebrate all aspects of sex/gender and self-expression (Berrick 2015). However, these groupings are becoming more marginalized as the formal control of the game solidifies with the governing body WFTDA – closing down grass roots play options.

Conversely, and in a very different stance to most sporting organisations dealing with “men’s” sport, the MRDA Non-Discrimination Policy as outlined on their website in June 2015 allows anyone to play::

MRDA, pursuant to its mission of promoting men’s roller derby, does not and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion (creed), gender, gender expression, age, national origin (ancestry), disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations. MRDA 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. These activities include, but are not limited to, membership eligibility, disbursement of resources, and eligibility for office. MRDA is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all skaters, officials, volunteers, and fans.

In our interview with the President of MRDA we asked about this gender policy and how the Association decided on its content. He stated, “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.” This quite radical view of gender in sport (a “men’s” sport allowing anyone) came about via the intervention of skaters, as the President notes:

We never intended to exempt a trans or non-binary gendered skater who wasn't skating or couldn't skate on a women's league- we had just never thought of it. As our membership grew, we were thankfully able to get more eyes on this wording and more suggestions. One of our league representatives (there are 3 from each league) is a founding member of the 'trans, gender non-conforming, and intersex athlete network', and offered us some much needed perspective on how this language was affecting/could affect a person with a non-binary gender identification.

As a result of this the MRDA has an inclusive and fluid conception of gender that focuses on a person's self-identification instead of biological markers of sex and receives significant support from the derby community for their view: “Yay for MRDA, but fuck WFTDA. That entire page [WFTDA rules] pissed me the fuck off.” (Dragon Age Thoughts, n.d.)

In the Australian context, the body tasked to support the growth of the sport, Roller Derby Australia (RDA), also takes an open view: “RDA work with all aspects of derby regardless of gender. With the steady rise in men's roller derby leagues, RDA will work with these leagues to ensure their needs are met. All of RDA's initiatives are non-gender specific and encourage engagement from all members” (Interview with official representative of RDA). Yet, despite this broad acceptance of men's roller derby, RDA does not have a firm position or direction for the sport in this regards. They explicitly work with WFTDA, which means that WFTDA's rigid gender policy is still in effect.

On the surface, WFTDA’s gender policy “makes sense”. In a world where biological determinism is often the norm, having a policy that relies on biological markers of gender becomes acceptable to some. Even feminist researchers working throughout the 20th and 21st Century still struggle with biology and gender. As Birke (2003) notes, “feminists tend to object strongly (and with good reason) to claims that, say, women’s hormones predispose them to like ironing. Yes few of us, I assume, would want to contest that oestrogens affect the uterus, or that evolutionary processes have helped to shape our opposable thumbs” (41). In efforts to reject crude determinism – necessary efforts though they were – some feminists ended up relying on dualistic notions of gender and sex. And even as poststructural accounts emerged which prioritised flux and fluidity, the problems of biological/social dualism remain. Birke notes how ‘tricky it is to talk about biology without falling into the abyss of determinism (just as it’s tricky to speak of social processes without falling into the abyss of relativism)!’ (48).

It is beyond the scope of this current article to more fully engage with interdisciplinary notions of sex and gender. However what is important to note is the difficulty of accounting for sexual difference. Scholars, such as Irigaray (1993) and Grosz (1994) have come some way in challenging us to think about bodies as *process(es)* rather than as fixed. And poststructuralist thinkers, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have helped to reconsider humanness. Yet, for the majority of our research participants, these ideas are unknown, and many of our participants experienced an ongoing struggle with questions of gender in roller derby.

The position (and related policy above) posited by WFTDA does a range of troubling things. First, it delimits “women” via biological markers (hormone levels) and therefore excludes a whole range of people who might identify as “women”. In

making this distinction WFTDA is making a range of assumptions about gender, femininity, masculinity, and, specifically “sport”. WFTDA’s gender policy is connected closely with a conception of sport as competitive and serious (Breeze 2013). Our interview with Roller Derby Australia also acknowledged this competitive and serious aspect of the sport, with the representative stating:

Currently there seems to be a strong trend towards making the sport more athletic and focusing on the competitive aspects. While there are still many recreational leagues, more and more seem to be pushing roller derby as a legitimate sport.

In wanting to be taken seriously, the WFTDA has taken a firm stance on who can and who cannot participate and dictate whom a women is. This is sometimes expected, though not accepted, by more conservative types of organisations. However, for an organisation such as WFTDA, who are leading the charge on what is being discussed as the fastest growing sport in the world and one of the few contact sports women can enter into at any age or ability, these exclusions are not supportive of the kinds of transformations in sport such as those Hargreaves (1990) argued for.

Gendered Perspectives: fixed and fluid

In roller derby, there exists a deep, on-going and troubled discourse within the members of the sport regarding the position and role of men in the sport. This ranges across all aspects of the sport, from playing together, co-ed/mixed leagues, and the role of men in coaching, administration and leadership positions. Illustrative of the deep divide in derby are these comments made by a globally famous female identifying skater/coach was asked what she thought of men in derby in 2015. During an ethnographic interview she stated: “We should treat Men’s derby like how we’d wish the mainstream would treat Women’s sport in general. We can’t close the door now, it is too late for that. The MRDA and WFTDA should merge.” Through our

ethnographic work we were able to interview many people about this issue. One queer/femme identifying skater disclosed her opposition towards men in derby: “Look I know it’s not politically correct to say it and people will hate me for it, but I’d just wish the men would fuck off from derby, it’s our sport and I just want the female energy”. Conversely, Swirko, a female skater and blogger (2015, emphasis in original) comments:

I’ve read all the blogs. I’ve scrolled through the comments. I thought it would have all petered out by now, but still the occasional post pops up on some corner of the web about how men shouldn’t be allowed to play roller derby because they don’t deserve it. I’m sorry, guys: I wish these women would **stop misusing feminism** and hurry up and drop out of this sport which is quickly outgrowing them.

The on-going debates around gender indicate its performative, contested nature, with many people we observed struggling to reconcile “traditional” gendered stereotypes with their lived experiences in the sport.

This is most apparent in the arguments around whether men should play with/against women. The trope of sport is that men are bigger, stronger faster and “better” than women, this is reinforced constantly across all sporting domains, and thus is carried over into derby. Men and women playing together is seen as both problematic and liberating, dependant on the persons perception, their athletic level, and their view of the future of the sport. However, what came through most strongly in our research was the ongoing and persistent view that men were stronger, more able, and ultimately hesitant to engage in sex integrated derby into the future.

Particularly as the sport grows and as players’ skills and strength improves, sex integration is viewed as less and less the ideal. For example, this blog post captures that tension:

(I’m about to say something I know some people disagree with, but for what it’s worth I do believe to be true.)

Why do we split sports into sexes? Because men are on average faster and stronger than women. So we split them for the same reason we split intermediate and professional level play- to get closer, fairer, competitive games. From that pov [Point of View], the female game has to create rules to keep out male athletes who would push out females; whereas in the male game, females are out competed and removed naturally from top level play. See -the NFL. This explains why the rules are probably always going to look different.

It doesn't even begin to touch on trans* players- apart from that we will always be fitting people in to the m/f binary where they don't necessarily want to be, unless a whole new ground up structure is built. (Her Ain Sel 2015)

These kinds of sentiments were expressed by some of our participants and demonstrates the need for a more consultative approach towards the development of sex integrated derby.

At the elite level of men's derby there is a strong resistance to playing women's teams – this is despite their inclusive gender policy for their own leagues. Speaking to a senior American skater who identified as male about his experiences playing women we noted the following interaction:

Interviewer: Are you looking forward to playing [a particular women's league]?

Participant: Nope, we don't usually skate against Women

Interviewer: Really?

Participant: Yep, it's a lose / lose situation

Interviewer: Why?

Participant: If we lose that is bad for the team as women have beaten us and if we win everyone just complains about guys hitting girls. No one likes a 200 pound guy smashing a 100 pound girl. Ya know, you can't hit girls. We just look bad.

Conversely, women can be encouraging of what is offered in co-ed training and bouts.

In both our ethnographic interviews and in the material found online in publicly accessible blogs, women would sometimes express a very open, excited and inclusive view of men in derby. One Australian blogger wrote,

Watching the co-ed [roller derby] bout you could be forgiven for wincing as the men charged through blockers, some of them female, and knocking them over. But it is not harsh...they all know each other and are all friends, with a passion for Roller Derby.

Varsity Derby League DHR Sophomores player, *Maleficent Mara* says the men and women train together so it was nice to play against the men. “It makes you tougher and you learn to deal with the harder hits and the bigger skaters, you do get some bigger and taller girls when you line up against them it makes it a lot easier because you are used to playing with the boys.” (Lorenz 2014)

One of our participants, a (now former) president of what she called a “co-ed” league reflected thoughtfully on sex integration in roller derby and gave the following extended response.

We had instituted segregated training as well so they didn’t even train with us. I must admit I did really push that. Again, not because I had a problem with training with the boys and in fact I didn’t even mind doing contact with them but it had previously been a problem for us so it was just easier just to split it. However, having these sorts of issues that came up and realising that we were developing a bit of a them and us kind of culture, I’ve now switched my thinking to realize, okay, if we’re a coed league, we’ve got to be a coed league. Which doesn’t mean again, I’m still not for coed contact but training together in non-contact drills, in that sort of way and having the guys part of the organisational process of the league I think is really important. We had a training meeting the other night and interestingly enough one of the members of that committee was clearly quite emotional about the idea and not in a positive way.

This response, taken from an interview conducted in 2011, is illustrative of the large proportion of derby players, both male and female, who are hopeful and positive about sex integrated leagues, including training and governance. Secondly, it also points towards the ongoing and consistent concern about gendered differences in body strength.

Among referees, the majority of whom identify as male (often partners of female skaters), we found a constant debate as to whether they should penalize differently based on size of skater – with the implicit undertone being – should bigger, larger *men* be more penalized for “hits” on skaters? The WFTDA rules are very clear on penalties and don’t take into account skater size/weight/height or strength. But this does not deter on-going discussion. For example, a male acknowledged that at one

game he saw a male legally block a female player (“sending her flying”) on the track and thought it excessive. He then admitted that he witnessed exactly the same hit and effect next day, but from a women – and he admitted he had to re-assess the first event. The refrain that men are “too big” and hit “too hard” also deeply troubles some woman skaters – comments such as “bullshit, don’t you dare pull your hits on me” and “c’mon, women can hit just as hard/well – not all men are big and not all women are small”. Tough and strong female play is lauded as good derby, whereas the same from men is often interpreted differently. As one of our male participants noted during a discussion regarding the perception that men play too hard: “Look we just have to accept that men hitting hard and well will just look dangerous and likely get people penalised, whereas women hitting hard and well will get a pat on the back for strong derby” (male skater). Despite the ongoing biological and sociological challenges to the deeply rooted binary gender ideals, they persist and influence popular understandings of gender in sport (Matthews 2014). Even in roller derby, which might perhaps be described as a type of socially “safe” female enclave (Matthews 2014, 115), pseudoscientific narratives of gender and sexuality are used to justify and understand practices. Rather than entertaining the possibility of weight categorisation, or alternative modes of play that pits those at the same skill level against each other, instead the problem is reduced to gender. Some women are “scared of them [men]”, while men are scared of “looking like a douche” (“douche” being the common derby term regarding unfair/mean play).

Conclusions

We cannot successfully integrate the gender spectrum and reduce/eliminate discrimination until one of the most obvious, visible, valorized and re-produced

binaries of gender is broken – that of *sport* and *women’s sport*. That very qualifier (women’s) attached to nearly all sport is a perpetual marker of inferiority. Integrated sport should be the goal of all. As Louisey Rider (2014), a female skater, argues in a blog post on men, derby and feminism: “to have a chance of achieving its goals feminism as a movement needs to redefine itself as sexless, and position itself in a way that is more relevant to modern society – people as people, not men and women.” Derby offers an opportunity to enact a genderless sporting landscape in the shape that Hargreaves called for so long ago.

Wearing (1988) argues that “in the area of leisure, feminists need to move beyond the continuous documentation of women’s oppression to see the many and varied ways that women and men can challenge and change male domination and also to suggest ways that both genders may work together to bring about change” (160). Demonstrations of integration are crucial to re-fashioning gendered views in society and sport offers an obvious site for challenge. What we have shown however is the deeply challenging ideas that come from trying to combine traditional conceptions of men, women and their sporting prowess to a sport that is full contact, on roller skates. Derby, as a “first-mover” in the space of integration, management by players for players and an overt alternative view offers an avenue for gender emancipation, if players can resolve their own troubled feelings on gender and only if WFTDA ceases its regressive restrictions on what a women is.

Even as we finish writing this article, blog posts and discussions about sex integration in roller derby continue. Despite the authoritative position of WFTDA, players are creatively attempting to envision a sex-integrated future for the sport. One of our participants, a member of a sex-integrated league that is struggling to find ways forward, stated:

Perhaps one idea could be for women to play against each other and then every third jam is all male. Rather than having males and females on the track at the same time. So if we had the capacity to do that, then I'll be interested in looking. (female participant, Interview)

These kinds of creative responses are needed if the sport is to continue to be a space of inclusion and empowerment for people of all genders. The opportunities for leagues around the world to trial alternative formats of play, including suggestions such as the one above, would be one way forward.

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