

Shame, pain and fame: Sportswomen losing in Australia's mainstream media reporting

This article adds to a growing body of literature that engages with failure as a way of knowing and understanding the social. Through a focus on images of sportswomen's loss or failure in three Australian newspapers during the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games we analyzed affective-discourses and patterns in images and accompanying headlines, captions and stories to explore the place of loss in the narrative of mainstream sport reporting. Through this focus on loss we hoped to find points of rapture that might generate new conceptions of women in sport. What we found was that stories of loss in mainstream newspaper coverage reproduced transphobic, racist, nationalistic, ageist, and sexist discourses. We conclude calling for research that explores how athletes self-present their losses in digital platforms subjectively rather than being reported 'on'.

Keywords: Loss, failure, media representations, women, visual affective discourse

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Women have been consistently underrepresented in sports reporting and, even as this is slowly changing, the media still fails to represent women in their multiplicity (Bruce and Hardin 2014; Dunne 2017; Petty and Pope 2019). For example, women of colour, Black women, trans women, intersex women, and women with disabilities are mostly underrepresented, or presented as embroiled in controversy in Western mainstream media. Indeed, in Australia, traditional media coverage of sportswomen is still dominated by depictions of 'white women smiling' (Pavlidis et al, 2019). Besides calling for more diversity, accompanied by the dismantling of colonial practices in representations of sportswomen in the media, we are also interested in how else we might be able to support change in the way women in sport are represented through an emphasis on affect and embodiment.

To do this we orient towards one of the key elements of sport itself – loss. Drawing on (Pavlidis, 2013) where failure became a productive orientation for understanding the dynamics of gendered power relations we focused our analysis on images of sportswomen's loss/failure in Australian media over the course of the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games (GC2018). In a special issue on sport and failure edited by Sheppard (2019, 267) (*Journal of Sport and Social Issues*), she notes, 'failure can catalyze acts of liberation *from* and resistance *to* restrictive and unequal modes of being in "societies structured in dominance.'" Failure in this capacity can help to imagine alternatives to hegemonic norms, structures, and identities' (original emphasis). The ideas in circulation, including our own that we present here, are indicative of a particular zeitgeist in contemporary society. The promise of capitalism and the 'good life' have been shown to be unachievable for many. In areas unrelated to sport, workers' rights are being eroded, the gap between the rich and the poor

continues to grow, and the effects of climate change are already upon us, but many nation states refuse to take serious action. We are, on many accounts, losing. Against this backdrop, learning from failure, resilience, loss, depression, apathy and hopelessness have been important themes recently raised in a range of fields including, positive psychology (Seligman 2011), cultural studies (Hickey-Moody 2019), geography (Osborne 2019), and others.

Yet, in sport, loss is often disavowed. Winning is everything, especially in elite sport. In the context of large-scale sport events such as the Olympics or Commonwealth Games, athletes train for years in the hope of winning a medal. Many athletes are publicly supported in their quest for gold, adding to the pressures for them to perform. Doping and cheating are big issues, with committees and funding dedicated to ensuring the integrity of sport. This leads to our central research questions: how is loss represented in mainstream sport reporting of women? And what does loss 'do'/generate that might support a more inclusive future? In the section that follows we outline some contemporary ideas around loss and failure in sport, particularly for sportswomen in the media and what this emphasis might open up in terms of new lines of enquiry to support inclusive sport. We then explain our methodology before discussing in-depth three prominent cases of sportswomen losing during the mainstream newspaper reporting of GC2018. Finally, we conclude the article by summarizing the key insights brought to bear on sport communication, the limitations of the study, and future directions for research that may continue to address the persistent marginalization of sportswomen in the media.

Women's successes and failures in sport media

At the heart of this paper is an acknowledgement of 'the unevenness of social change' as it is reflected in sports media (Cooky, Messner and Musto 2015, 263; Bruce and Hardin

2014). In their longitudinal study Cooky, Messner and Musto (2015, 261) noted that despite the ‘dramatic movement of girls and women into sport’, the majority of sports coverage in the United States is still heavily focused on men’s sport, a finding that is consistent in many contemporary geocultural contexts (for example Bruce and Hardin 2014; Dunne 2017; Lumby, Caple and Greenwood 2010). Despite this, some changes to the coverage of women’s sport have been noted (see Petca, Bivolaru and Graf 2013). For example, Cooky, Messner and Musto’s (2015) research suggested contemporary commentators are less likely to portray sportswomen as sexual objects or a ‘joke’, while Petty and Pope’s (2018) examination of English media coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup found that during the tournament women’s football received significant, and largely positive attention in the print media. Our own research (Pavlidis et al, 2019) likewise found that during GC2018, sportswomen received considerable attention in some mainstream newspaper outlets, with some stories about female athletes in prime positions on front or back covers. However, we also found that white, cisgender and heterosexual sportswomen still dominated in the images chosen for the Games reporting. Hence, while improvements in quantity and tone are evident in some media outlets, in other areas of sports media there has been little or no change in either the diversity, quality or quantity of coverage of women’s sport.

There have of course been some important interventions in the ways sportswomen are thought of in the media, beyond being depicted as sexual objects. Heywood and Dworkin’s (2003, 11) influential text, *Built to Win* demonstrated how, through corporate will and feminist influence, market conditions converged so that strong female athlete icons could be sold to a ‘financially powerful female demographic’. We concur that powerful and strong women demonstrating their sporting prowess may now be accepted and even embraced by media and audiences. For many sportswomen, particularly white women adhering to normative notions of femininity, representations of winning and success are increasingly

common in the media (Pavlidis et al, 2019). However, this trend has not gained universal traction, as aptly demonstrated in 2019 when the media published a photograph of Australian rules footballer Tayla Harris in action, kicking for a goal. The athleticism of Harris' kick was overshadowed when she became the target of online sexual harassment and trolling. As a further example, in some media, the successes of South African middle-distance runner Caster Semenya are questioned or presented with ambivalence, accompanied by either explicit or implicit statements arguing she has an unfair advantage over her competition due to her genetics (for example, CNN 2019). Our key point here is that although media coverage of sportswomen may have improved, these improvements are inconsistent, incomplete, and generally reserved for certain (white) women embodying 'success' or 'winning' subject positions.

In their research on the Paralympic Games and athletes, Bush, Silk and Porter (2013, 632) argued that there is a need for academic work that 'can understand sport, sporting bodies and physical activity as important "sites" through which social forces, discourses, institutions and processes congregate, congeal and are contested in a manner that contributes to the shaping of human relations, subjectivities, and experiences in particular, contextually contingent ways'. We suggest that a myopic focus in sports media on winning / success denies opportunities to fully engage with elite sportswomen as the vanguard for girls and women's occupation of sporting spaces, and that consideration of loss and failure may more productively help us to 'poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life' (Halberstam 2011, 3).

While the loss and failure of sportswomen has not received significant attention, there are exceptions, and broader literature on loss in sport (see Ball 1976; Fischer and McClearen 2019; Gieseler 2019; Halberstam 2016; Sheppard 2019). For example, Fischer and McClearen (2019) drew on Halberstam's (2011) work on the queer art of failure to

understand the barriers for trans women in sport, focusing on mixed-martial arts. They analyzed the case of MMA fighter Fox Fallon, who was hugely successful, but who then lost an important fight. In the article, they unpack the economic, biological and ideological arguments that discriminate against Fox Fallon as a trans women in sport and point towards an emphasis on failure as a way of opening up these debates. They quote Halberstam (2011, 2–3) who wrote, ‘under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well’. Thus, LGBTQIA+ people are often positioned as failing (Fischer and McClearen 2019), as are other marginalized people.

Fischer and McClearen (2019) argue, failing can be humanizing and challenges myths about trans women’s ‘natural superiority’ to cisgender women. They write, ‘Fox’s failure effectively ruptured long-standing racialized and gendered hegemonic scripts that enabled her to exist in a liminal space outside the confines of these discourses, which further brings to light the queering of failure’ (Fischer and McClearen 2019, 15). In other words, Fox’s loss was in many ways a win, not only for herself but for trans women more generally. In losing, Fox was humanized and vulnerable. To conclude their article Fischer and McClearen (2011, 187) quote Halberstam: ‘rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all our own inevitable fantastic failures’. For Fox, her failure was productive of her (and others’) humanness. Yet failure cannot be understood as the same for all athletes.

Take for example skateboarders, whose losses and failures are central to their identification as bonafide skateboarders (see also Gieseler 2019 on extreme sports). (Willing et al, 2019) use *The Bones Brigade* documentary to explore some of the contradictory and complex relations between success and failure for men in skateboarding. Exploring contradictory forms of masculinity they note how the ‘boy scouts’ (including skaters such as

Tony Hawk) were sometimes ridiculed by the ‘bad boys’ as not tough enough – in this narrative the winners became losers (Willing et al, 2019). Skateboarding has a culture of embracing ‘failure’ and celebrating ‘misfits’ and ‘outsiders’. This is reflected in numerous blogs and skate publications, such as the below example from *Jenkem* [an online skateboarding magazine] that reflects on a YouTube skate video (entitled ‘Sorry’) featuring Swedish professional skateboarder Ali Boulala. The author of the article writes: ‘He bails. He gets hurt. He gets really hurt. And he doesn’t win...he’s just like us. He is our champion’ (Ridge 2015, n.p.). Skateboarders’ embrace of failure is perhaps one of the sport’s unique strengths in that it provides a space of acceptance for people to occupy the position of ‘loser’ without stigma or shame (though important to note that it is mainly men).

The examples of skateboarding and of Fox Fallon’s productive failure provide the impetus for the emphasis on the affective discourse of loss for this article. Of course not all loss can be liberating. The affects of loss may materialize in loss of reputation, sponsorship, support and more. They may also materialize through injury and physical or mental pain. Focusing on how women are represented when they lose or ‘fail’ may provide some insight into why (and which) sportswomen are continually marginalized in sport reporting and how this might be addressed.

Visual affective discourse

This paper draws from the analysis of three traditional Australian print newspapers: *The Australian* (national), the *Gold Coast Bulletin* (Gold Coast), and the *Courier Mail* (Queensland). We analyzed the reporting of GC2018 in these papers from 6 April to 16 April and identified all images of athletes ‘losing’. We then analyzed the text (caption, headline and news story) surrounding these images. In total there were 41 images of athletes losing with 30 of these images portraying women. We focus here on sportswomen exclusively, as

there remains a gap in the interpretation of sportswomen's losses as argued in the previous sections.

The sampling decision to focus on these traditional newspapers, was influenced by our previous analysis of both progressive (e.g. *The Guardian Australia*) and traditional media during GC2018 (Pavlidis et al, 2019). In the analysis of traditional media outlets we identified that the embodiment and affect of loss was presented as potentially problematic. These newspapers presented loss through for example, surveilling trans women's bodies with headlines such as 'transgender lifter buckles under strain' (*The Australian* 2018, 10 April), while celebrating patriotism and whiteness (Pavlidis et al, 2019). Thus, the decision to focus on traditional newspapers, notably all News Corp publications owned by Murdoch, is to trouble the problematic discourses that these outlets continue to reproduce about women's intersectional identities and bodies in large-scale sport events.

The production of these problematic discourses (supported through text and images) is complex and driven by the individual and collective decisions/ actions of many (e.g., journalists, photographers, editors, executives, advertisers, consumers, and so on). The resultant media can influence individuals' attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (e.g., Slater 2007) and broader cultural flows (Maguire 2011), in line with media organizational values and goals. For example, these traditional media outlets continue to reflect the colonial construction of the Australian nation, which is embedded in racism and heteronormativity (McKay and Rowe 1987; Pavlidis et al, 2019). Hence, Murdoch's domination of the Australian media landscape (Tiffen 1987; Young 2017) raises important questions about what exactly images of loss are supposed to 'do' to 'us'? The underlying purpose of other stories in the Murdoch press may be more discernable, whether that be to create moral panic (Cricher 2002), sway voting (Dilliplane 2014), protect their own interests (Hobbs and McKnight 2014), or perpetuate racist notions of 'Australianness' and deny the sovereignty of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Manne 2011). Yet when it comes to sport, the (micro)politics are less obvious, yet perhaps no less important to analyze.

Our reading of these issues was mediated through our own positionalities as feminist researchers concerned with intersectionality, affect, social justice, and our privileged identities as middle-class white (Adele and Millie), and white passing women (Laura) (see van Ingen 2013). Thus, our methodology is grounded in feminist reflexivity as we engaged in a critical dialogue during the analysis process that included discussion about the role of our distinct positionalities and ‘gaze’ in the interpretation (Finlay 2002; Rose 2007). Also worth noting is our inter- and multi-disciplinary perspectives coming from diverse sociocultural, feminist, decolonial, and management/business backgrounds.

The analysis of images was informed by a form of visual analysis, drawing on the work of Wetherell (2013) on affective discursive practices. Wetherell (2013, 364) argues that separating out affect and discourse, where discourse (and with it, consciousness and emotion) is positioned as inadequate and second-hand to affect, is unhelpful, and uninformed by affective science. Affective science (psychobiology and neuroscience) supports a more integrated account of affect and consciousness. Rather than an insistence that discourse is somehow separate to affect, Wetherell (2013, 364) shows the ways that affect and discourse are related, conveying, ‘the feel and patterning of bodies in action, the lively flow of social life and sticks closely to participants’ perspectives’. Thus, we deeply reflected on how bodies were presented in the sports space both through discourse and beyond it (see Pink 2007, 2012; Maclure 2013). This is not a turn away from discourse, as there are clear resonances between our approach and other forms of thematic analyses; instead our approach is an extension and an attempt to bring bodies into research. As Phoenix (2019, 99) notes, visual methods can provide insight into emotions and sensations ‘beyond written and spoken word’. Central to this is our role as researchers and an acknowledgement that realities (what is

known) are co-produced through methods (Law 2007). In other words, the instrument or apparatus of research (in the case of this article, our bodies, senses, especially gaze, and empathy) effects that which it seeks to know (or measure) (Barad 2007).

We identified the images and news stories of loss as those that communicated shame, pain, failing, disappointment and frustration. We recorded the reason given for the loss (e.g. disqualification, injury) and how each of the narratives were constructed in relation to the image (e.g. shaming). The analysis also prompted a dialogue among us about embodying loss through our intersectional experiences of for example, motherhood and/or academic precarity, thus centering affective practice in our analysis. Therefore, our analysis focuses on Deleuze's (2004) ideas of 'sense' as both material and linguistic, 'resonating with the body and the brain' (in Maclure 2013, 661).

The analysis process involved individual immersion in the data, reflective discussions between the three of us, and analysis of the overall construction of each media story asking: What is the sense of the 'whole story' as it appeared in print (including caption, headline, image, news story)? What ideas do these stories generate? We started the analysis discussing what remained invisible in these constructions and the affects evoked through reading and seeing. As we analyzed and discussed these loss stories through a feminist and affective lens, we found, for example, that there were no images of women of colour and Black women losing, due to the prevalence of white sportswomen's representation in these traditional Australian newspapers (Pavlidis et al, 2019). By investigating what was not visible, the gaps, we identified intersectional inequalities and affective and embodied silences that persist in the herstorying and storying of sportswomen (see van Ingen, 2013; Ratna, 2017). However, rather than focusing on uncovering hidden meanings, here we focus on exploring the question of what do these stories of loss do?

We focus on the top three cases of loss found: hurdles athlete Sally Pearson (seven stories), racewalker Claire Tallent (five stories) and weightlifter Laurel Hubbard (two stories). There were also images of team loss, however for consistency of analysis we have chosen to focus on individuals for this article. The analysis of the news stories surrounding these athletes during GC2018 provides important insights into the representation and the materiality of sport, which are affective, and destabilise the discourse of ‘women want to have fun’, and ‘men want to win’. Indeed these binary discourses remain embedded in media portrayals of elite sportswomen today (for example Cormack 2015; Coulomb Cabagno and Rasclé 2006).

Findings

The cases presented here provide examples of three different types of engagement with loss as affect. As elaborated below, in the media coverage Pearson was constructed as a celebrity whose injury was devastating (for her) and disappointing for the Australian nation. Tallent was disqualified as she strove to win a gold medal. Her emotional response to the loss was presented as ‘acceptable’ in the three newspapers, as despite the fact she had ‘broken the rules’, she displayed great ‘sportsmanship’. On the other hand, Hubbard’s loss due to injury was presented as a ‘relief’ to those who questioned her involvement in women’s weightlifting as a trans athlete. Thus, she was constantly ‘othered’ in the discourse of loss, while Pearson, who was similarly injured, was ‘embraced’ (see Cooky et al. 2010). Overall, the news stories about these athletes highlight how loss is experienced differently through affective and embodied experiences of shame (and shaming), pain and fame.

Sally Pearson

Hurdles athlete Sally Pearson was selected as the final carrier of the Queen's Baton during the GC2018 opening ceremony. As a world champion hurdler, and well known Australian athlete, Pearson's involvement in the Queen's Baton relay, and the opening ceremony celebrated the spirit and values of Australia as the host nation (see for example, Wood 2018). Further, the GC2018 (2018, n.p.) website described how 'batonbearers represent the spirit of the Commonwealth and inspire others to be great', and how the baton relay symbolically 'embraces the modern and multicultural Commonwealth of today, engaging with young and old, increasing our sense of connection and our understanding of each other'. Pearson's selection as batonbearer was significant as the Commonwealth Games Federation had gender equality at the centre of its agenda for fairness and inclusion during GC2018 (Commonwealth Games Federation 2018).

However, the day after being the batonbearer at the opening ceremony, Pearson announced that she was withdrawing from participating in the Games due to an Achilles injury. As a result, most of the news stories about Pearson in the three analyzed newspapers, were built on information and images derived during the press conference where Pearson announced her withdrawal. In seven photos accompanying these news stories Pearson was photographed with a disappointed and tense expression, her lips pursed and her eyes cast down. Larger photos from the press conference were cropped into smaller close up images of Pearson's disappointed face, accompanied by headlines associating her withdrawal with 'heartbreak' (*Courier Mail*, April 15, 2018), and describing her as 'shattered' (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, April 6, 2018) due to her 'secret agony' (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, April 6, 2018), all of which are arguably affective discourses that surround 'loss'. In discussing the 'sense' of the news stories of Pearson's withdrawal, we found contesting constructions of 'loss' embedded in national pride and shame, and betrayal.

To illustrate how Pearson's loss was constructed in the newspapers, we will focus on two examples. The first example resembles the majority of the newspapers' reporting on Pearson's withdrawal as 'losing with pride', while the second example departs from the latter by constructing a sense of 'betrayal'. On April 6, 2018 the *Courier Mail* had a full page spread of Pearson's withdrawal, with three images and the headline 'Sally falls at final hurdle'. The two smaller images in the spread included a past action shot and a photograph of Pearson raising the Queen's Baton and saluting the crowd at the GC2018 opening ceremony. However, the larger, central image was a cropped and zoomed image of Pearson's face at the press conference, with a disappointed expression and a highlight quote that reads: 'I was absolutely gutted. There were a lot of tears flowing, there were a lot of emotions, I guess you could call it grief' (*Courier Mail*, April 6, 2018). Pearson's emotional reactions to her withdrawal were accompanied by a discourse of solidarity and national pride, with the subheading reading 'grief-stricken but unbroken injured champ, vows to return after heartache' (*Courier Mail*, April 6, 2018). In a similar full page spread on April 6, 2018 the *Gold Coast Bulletin* presented the same photo with the headline 'I'm not done yet'. The presentation of Pearson in passive (rather than active) positions in some ways denies her previous successes, focusing instead on inability to perform the role assigned to her as the leader of the Australian team.

Reflecting on the above examples, Pearson's loss was constructed as short term. She is allowed some pride in the reporting of her 'loss' by using the discourse surrounding her 'celebrity' or Australian 'champ' status, while reflecting the analyzed newspapers' reporting emphasis on celebrating Australian nationalism – Pearson's loss, as a 'sportswoman celebrity' is 'our loss too' as a Commonwealth and Australian nation. In this regard, Nicholson, Sherry and Osborne (2016, 542–543) argued, 'in contemporary culture the media is a pervasive force in both contextualizing and shaping our values and attitudes towards a

myriad of social issues, including nationalism'. This resonates with the way in which, for example, celebrity athletes' losses, especially those which are conflated with a sense of national pride, are sensed as a collective loss for the nation (see Greer and McLaughlin 2019; Nicholson, Sherry and Osborne 2016; Wong and Trumper 2002). In the context of Australia, this is especially the case for athletes whose identities are considered 'normative' to the identity of the nation state of Australia (e.g. white, cisgender, heterosexual). Therefore, we can sense through the affective analysis of Pearson's withdrawal the way in which Australian nationalism is constructed alongside its colonial past and present (see Fuller 2018; Pavlidis et al, 2019). In most mainstream media reporting, Pearson's whiteness and normative gender and femininity allowed for her loss to be reported as collective to the Australian nation and through the reporting she was afforded dignity, despite her loss. Reporting on Pearson's injury (which maintained her dignity) contrasted to Hubbard's case presented below and more recent cases such as the mainstream media scrutiny and racism experienced by Indigenous Australian Rules football player Adam Goodes that led to his retirement (see Davey 2015).

However, loss is often presented in contradictory ways and Pearson's 'loss stories' also allowed us to learn about another layer of how the 'Australian nation' is constructed. Halberstam (2016, ix) notes that 'increasingly in contemporary media, sport serves as a shorthand for long standing myths about the nation'. We found that the myths associated with the Australian nation related to sporting success 'at all costs' as a 'sport-loving nation', and our disdain for 'tall poppies', positioned Pearson in conflict with these beliefs and values (see also Nicholson, Sherry and Osborne 2016, 548). Departing from Pearson's news stories of 'losing with pride' on the 8th of April, 2018 reporting in the *Courier Mail*, her loss was constructed in a different light, through scrutinizing her 'responsibility' to the Australian nation and to the sport industry. Using a similar photograph to that described in the first

example, Pearson's withdrawal story was alternatively presented with the headline: 'Retaining sponsors Sal's next hurdle' and a caption reading 'AWKWARD'. Here, Pearson's withdrawal or 'loss' was conflated with risk-taking discourse. The article discusses, through her manager's voice, the risks that her decision to not participate in GC2018 due to injury would have on her endorsements, sponsorship and funding. Although sportsmen would also face risks in terms of loss of sponsorship, there was a definite emphasis on Pearson's failure. She was pushing up against a double bind: the first was to win a gold medal, something that very few people achieve, and the second was to win gold as a woman, arguably an even harder endeavor. The story presented created the sense that she could not really afford to 'fail' or 'withdraw', which reflects the problematic structures in which the sport industry and sport media construct the 'losses' of elite athletes. This could also be conceptualized as the workings of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2006) in sport media reporting, which focus on 'elite' 'celebrity' athletes' attachments and desires to win, and responsibilities to the nation they are 'privileged' to represent, which arguably overshadow the realities of all athletes' experiences of injury, loss and withdrawal.

Claire Tallent

Similar to Sally Pearson, Claire Tallent's loss was affectively connected to Berlant's (2006) notion of 'cruel optimism'. Tallent is a race walker who has represented Australia in the Olympic Games (2012), Commonwealth Games (2010 and 2018), and several world championships. During GC2018 she competed in a 20km race walking event. Tallent was 36 years old at the time, and therefore considered to be approaching the end of her elite career. For much of the event, Tallent and fellow Australian athlete Jemima Montag vied for the lead position. When Tallent took the lead with two kilometers to go she was disqualified (due to a third and final warning for 'lifting', or lack of contact with the ground). Press photographers

captured the dramatic moment, with images in all three newspapers memorializing Tallent's distress. In *The Australian* (April 9, 2018) a collection of images first show the official holding out the red card to Tallent, while she throws her face skyward in anguish, mouth open and hands to her head. The next image shows her huddled on the ground while medical staff and a volunteer attempt to console her. In this image her face is furrowed due to the intensity of her crying and palpable disappointment. The final image shows her (back to the camera), embracing the eventual winner (Jemima Montag) at the finish line.

The images of Tallent and narratives around her loss emphasize intense emotion, associating this with women's bodies, as has historically been the case (e.g., Grosz, 1994). While the images illustrate Tallent's utter devastation, they also show her being a 'good sport' and congratulating her fellow competitors and the winner (Montag). This dual narrative (devastated athlete / good sport) was reiterated in both headlines (e.g., 'DQ [disqualification] shatters Tallent, but Aussie racer all class at finish line to congratulate champ' from the *Gold Coast Bulletin* on April 9, 2018) and image captions. Captions described how Tallent's devastation as 'impossible to hide' (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, April 9, 2018), but how 'she can still walk tall' as her behaviour post-event was the epitome of 'sportsmanship' (*The Australian*, April 9, 2018). A feature article on Tallent (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, April 10, 2018) stated how 'it was nice to see an act of good sportsmanship' when Tallent cheered home Montag. Concurrently, Tallent's distress (which she self-described as 'hysterical', *Gold Coast Bulletin*, April 10, 2018), was positioned as understandable, and profound but not chaotic because she was able to pull herself together in time to be a good sport.

In some respects the images and text describing Tallent's loss echo those associated with Sally Pearson – Tallent, also white, cisgender and heterosexual, is permitted by the media to lose with pride. Yet Tallent lacks the 'fame' of Olympic medal winner Pearson. In

addition, the reporting on Tallent's disqualification necessarily deemphasized her failure as a loss for the nation, because another Australian ultimately won the 20km race walk. The drama surrounding Tallent's loss overshadowed Montag's win, and was the focus of news coverage for other reasons. Specifically, the narratives around Tallent's 'loss' seemed to harbor an underpinning question around 'deserving' (that is, the notion that someone does or does not deserve what has happened to them), and the cruelty of elite sport. Tallent's disqualification was positioned as unfortunate as she had worked hard to earn a gold medal, and was clearly in a position to win. In addition, narratives suggested she 'deserved' a better outcome because she had recently become a mother and as she was nearing the end of her elite career (unlike the 20 year old event winner). As with Wrench and Garrett's (2018) analysis of Australian sportswomen, motherhood is normalized as a framing for Tallent as a female athlete. The news articles paid scant attention to the fact that Tallent's loss was the result of a disqualification: that she breached the rules of the event in her efforts to win gold, and that this risk is integral to race walking.

The surfacing of intense affect through Tallent's loss, that was then captured by photojournalists and published and circulated to hundreds of thousands of readers/viewers was in itself seemingly only just the start of the 'story'. Although she was clearly devastated at the time, a post-event interview published in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* (April 10, 2018) asked pointed 'questions' such as, 'Beside the obvious disappointment, what was behind those tears?' and 'So you felt like you let others down?' Tallent agreed she had let others down, particularly her husband and mother who had looked after her baby while she trained. It is also worth noting that Tallent's husband is a multiple world champion and Olympic medalist, which she is not, which may have added a layer of personal complexity to her loss, and also social comparison with her husband. Beyond the impact her loss had on her family and supporters, Tallent's loss was also positioned as disappointing because she was trying to

demonstrate a point to mothers. Tallent wanted ‘to win gold to prove that mums could be competitive at the highest level’ (Gold Coast Bulletin, April, 9, 2018). In combination, these factors combine to present Tallent’s ‘loss’ as devastating and undeserved, and her reaction as understandable and acceptable.

Hablerstam (2011, 12) asked: ‘What happens when we productively link failure to issues of racial justice, gender self-determination and alternative understandings of (material) success?’ Perhaps in this instance, the reporting on Tallent’s ‘failure’ is not so ‘productive’ in challenging understandings of success, but rather is a reproduction of the Australian traditional media’s privileging of white cisgender, heterosexual, and young women. The media were sympathetic toward Tallent, who was cast as a great ‘sportsman’. However, by building the story of her loss around her recent motherhood and her desire to show women that mothers can do anything, perhaps it could be argued that the media are perpetuating a sexist and shaming discourse around working mothers.

Further, the media adopted an ‘inside’ approach to reporting on Tallent’s loss, that is, the reporting sought to reveal deeper meaning for the strong affects she experienced due to her disqualification through using her voice and asking her questions and quoting these responses in the news stories. This ‘inside’ approach sought to justify her intense emotion, and to enable audiences to ‘understand’ what was going on for her. Tallent (and Pearson) were both presented as having an interior life, and their losses were ‘embraced’, helping readers comprehend the intensity of their loss experience. In this respect, the media’s reporting of Tallent’s and Pearson’s loss contrasts markedly with the presentation of Hubbard’s loss, as explained next.

Laurel Hubbard

The affective discourse of loss of New Zealand weightlifter Laurel Hubbard present a very different conception in the news media analyzed. Several images appear of her suffering a ‘career ending’ injury. The *Gold Coast Bulletin* and *The Australian* newspaper both ran stories featuring similar images and framing of Hubbard’s loss on April 10, 2018. The *Gold Coast Bulletin* chose the headline, ‘Hubbard’s games tilt ends with arm injury’, and the sub-captation, ‘controversial transgender athlete injures elbow during lift attempt’. The image chosen was of Hubbard mid-lift, her right arm has released the bar and is clear, her left arm is still holding the bar as it falls behind her, with her arm twisted at an awkward angle. In this image, her face is uplifted with her mouth open as if crying out in pain, and an expression of deep anguish on her face. Although the image shows the sportswoman ‘in action’, it is not an image of strength and power, but instead displays a complex range of affective discourses around loss and pain.

Hubbard’s participation in GC2018 had attracted both supportive and discriminatory commentary (Ewart 2018). Representations of Hubbard confirm Fischer and McClearen’s (2019, 17) assertion that ‘the rise in trans visibility has also results in the increased surveillance and regulation of trans people by the state’, and in this case the media. Hubbard was allowed to participate (because there was no rule that could exclude her), but her career was scrutinized and criticized. As Fischer and McClearen (2019, 4) note, ‘most of the sporting world assumes that trans women have physiological and biological advantages over cis women; hence, paternalistic and sexist views often see women’s sports in need of protection’. Despite meeting the International Olympic Committee requirements to compete as a woman, many high profile sport leaders still publicly questioned her participation. For example, the head coach of the Samoan team Jerry Wallwork gave this comment to the ABC, ‘A man is a man and a woman is a woman and I know a lot of changes have gone through,

but in the past Laurel Hubbard used to be a male champion weightlifter' (in Ewart 2018). The *chef de mission* for the Nauru team, Dr Kieren Keke and Michael Keelan, Australian Weightlifting Federation Chief Executive also both publicly criticized Hubbard's inclusion (Davidson 2018; AAP 2017) including making a formal complaint about her involvement. Hubbard's journey to the GC2018 was tainted by discriminatory comments, as well as dead-naming, and claims that her participation was 'unfair'.

The Australian on April 10, 2018 also featured a story about Hubbard's loss, including two images of her at the time of her injury. The headline for this story read: 'Transgender lifter buckles under the strain' and the accompanying story deadnames Hubbard while describing her loss as 'unfortunate'. Reading the images and accompanying captions and headlines associated with Hubbard's apparent career ending injury we argue that the overall discourse is one of quasi-celebration - the 'problem' of Hubbard (as a trans women in sport) has been resolved through her injury, bringing the controversial lead up to the games to a non-confrontational conclusion. This is deeply hurtful to Hubbard and other trans women in sport. Both the *Bulletin* and the *Australian* include images of Hubbard that capture the moment of her injury and show her pain, despair and vulnerability. This reflects the way in which transphobia is reproduced in mainstream sports media, contrasting starkly with the presentation of Sally Pearson's injury and Claire Tallent's disqualification. Hubbard was not given a voice or interviewed in the articles featuring her, and the affects are mediated through unflattering images of her. In many ways her injury and loss meant that there was no longer a need to engage in the types of important questions trans women bring to sport. Trans women, like Hubbard, challenge us to re-think the meaning of competition - what is fair? Was there ever a level playing field? What about socio-economic, racial and other types of advantage? How can we structurally reframe competition outside gender binaries?

Although the media constructed Hubbard's loss as a 'relief', her loss was not as productive or transformative as MMA fighter Fallon's, described by Fischer and McClearen (2019). Fallon's loss enabled her to be accepted as a woman - arguments about trans women's biological and physical superiority and the unfairness of trans women in sport were shattered by her loss. But Hubbard did not get this chance. At the time of reporting on April 2018 the media erroneously 'celebrated' Hubbard's injury as the end of her career. Yet, Hubbard has continued to compete, and continues to face a backlash against her involvement in women's weightlifting (Ewart 2019).

Conclusion

In this article we question the ways loss is represented in mainstream sport reporting and ask, what does loss 'do'/ generate that might support a more inclusive future? We hoped analyzing sportswomen's losses would provide a piece of the puzzle towards inclusive media representation. However, we found that the Australian mainstream media's reporting of sportswomen's losses are not necessarily productive at all. Instead, we have found that stories of loss can also reproduce transphobic, racist, nationalistic, ageist, and sexist discourses that permeate mainstream sports cultures. In this way, loss has become a way of knowing and revealing these inequalities. For instance, the reporting of loss was dominated by images and stories about white women, reinforcing existing patterns of racism and marginalization in sport. White, heteronormative and traditionally feminine athletes were presented with more compassion than athletes bearing 'markers of difference' (Frisby 2005, 3), such as trans woman Laurel Hubbard, while women of colour and Black women's affective experiences of loss remained invisible.

However, there are limitations to be acknowledged. The first is that our selection of traditional newspapers were all owned by the Murdoch Press. News Corporation is a

traditionally conservative news production conglomerate (see Alcorn 2019; Young 2019) and has historically presented more right-leaning perspectives on a range of topics as diverse as same-sex marriage, climate change, and responding to poverty and inequality. Two of the newspapers, *The Courier Mail* and *The Gold Coast Bulletin* are also tabloid papers.

Consequently, our findings, particularly in relation to transphobia may not be surprising. It may be debated whether these papers and their reporters and editorial teams view their remit as playing any role in critically seeking to improve the representation of sportswomen in the press. Another limitation of our approach was that we did not speak to media producers or editors and therefore cannot be conclusive in our comments around ‘choice’, specifically whose choice was it not to include deeper insights into, or the personal views of Hubbard? Hubbard may have chosen not to comment, the editor may have chosen not to include Hubbard’s comments, or production timelines may have inhibited the inclusion of Hubbard’s perspectives. Without further information into editorial decision making, we must acknowledge this as a limitation to our findings. This being said, our insight and analysis provides impetus for future research, including qualitative interviews with media producers, together with visual and textual analysis, to better understand the ways media values, commercial media interests, and sport collide or collude in representing sportswomen in particular ways.

Despite these limitations, and our ‘failure’ as researchers to find a productive role for loss in traditional reporting on sportswomen, our results are still significant in identifying the ways mainstream media outlets seek to find an ‘interior depth’ to rationalize the intense affects of loss, shame and pain for Pearson and Tallent (both white, cisgender women). In contrast, Hubbard was treated as ‘other’ and in reporting she was not granted an interior world that enabled the reading audience to empathize with her loss. Instead audiences were given opinions and perspectives that reinforce transphobia in sport and Hubbard’s intense

affect was left as an open question that cannot be answered. In addition to the transphobic representations of Hubbard, another layer of the interpretation of this is that the mainstream media are uncomfortable with the intensity of loss, pain and failure in sport when it cannot be explained/rationalized, and of what these affects might generate.

Representations of affective discourses around loss and failure can destabilize normative experiences of being in the world, the toxic positivity of modernity, and toxic masculinity (Halberstam 2016; Hickey-Mood 2019; Kian, Vincent and Mondello 2008). However, traditional framing of ‘sport’ presents a challenge to this opportunity. Inherent in much sport policy and sport management research is an assumption that sport is ‘good’; that sport transcends language barriers, cultural, religious and other differences both on and off the field. Yet, as our analysis demonstrates, the alleged transcendence of these barriers is not reflected in reporting by the mainstream media. Hence, we are inviting an important dialogue among disciplines interested in sport to engage with Sheppard’s (2019) question of what we can learn from ‘losers’.

We found that the images and stories of sportswomen’s loss promulgated by mainstream media were not necessarily productive or liberating, and instead reinforced discourses that discriminate against, and marginalize a range of sportswomen. Indeed, this was a key limitation of our research. Taking into account previous research that has found that social media and other digital media are not inherently a ‘space for resistant discourse’ and that dominant discourse is also reproduced in these spaces (Bruce and Hardin 2014, 271; Antunovic and Hardin 2012; Litchfield and Kavanagh 2019), there is an opportunity to examine depictions of sportswomen’s losses in ‘non-traditional’ media outlets (e.g. blogs and social media). Current social media accounts of Black women athletes, sportswomen of colour and/or trans women self-representing and disrupting dominant discourses are particularly important (e.g. Serena Williams, Allyson Felix; Caster Semenya; Ibtihaj

Muhammad Instagram and/or Twitter accounts). In these media platforms athletes are afforded an opportunity to present their own voices, bodies and 'interior' dialogues, circumventing mainstream journalistic interpretations of their affective experiences, while 'calling out' and disrupting the way that they are marginalized in mainstream sport cultures. Thus, new media technologies, such as social media, may provide an alternative route in which sportswomen in general can self-represent their own experiences of loss in more productive ways that also destabilize the status quo of traditional sports media subjectively, rather than being reported 'on'.

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