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The Promises and Pitfalls of Sex Integration in Sport and Physical Culture

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Scholars working in the academic field of sport studies have long debated the relationship between modern sport and gender (e.g., Hargreaves and Anderson, 2014; Hargreaves, 1994; Lenskyj, 1986; Messner, 2002). Within this body of work, modern sport forms – along with a great diversity of related activities, including dance, fitness training, physical education, etc. – have consistently been shown to carry meanings relative to the structures of gender prevailing in the wider social settings within which they take place, with patterns of participation and consumption clearly mapping onto gendered ideals. However, rather than simply mirroring such social norms, research suggests that many sporting practices were invented or have been purposefully developed in order to train young men and women in socially-approved gender behaviors to begin with (Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994; Theberge, 2000). Thus, much of contemporary physical culture finds its roots in the process which scholars describe as the ‘social construction of gender’; in other words, doing sports and other activities in gender-differentiated ways has long been a means of producing and maintaining difference in the lives of men and women, girls and boys.

Considering that such gender patterns are almost always implicated in structures of power (Lenskyj, 1990; Roth and Basow, 2004), then this purposeful division of the sexes becomes an important topic for scholars interested in the (re)production of inequality. For instance, feminist researchers have consistently argued that the institution of competitive sport has played a key role in symbolically validating male privilege (Messner, 1988; Theberge, 2000). Despite the fact that not all men enjoy participating in sports, the abilities of the male athlete nevertheless lend ideological support to the notion that ‘real’ men are brave, competitive, disciplined and physically strong – qualities highly valued and often associated with positions of power in wider social life. Concurrently, the exclusion of women from many high-profile sporting competitions throughout much of the twentieth century preserved sport as a symbolic space for celebrating men’s embodiment of these ‘masculine’ virtues, while the tendency to stigmatize and ridicule female athletes when they did enter the ‘male’ sporting

arena helped prevent them from effectively challenging the legitimacy of men's symbolic ownership of sport and its requisite qualities.¹

While this historical narrative of sport as a 'male preserve' (Dunning, 1986) has appeared widely throughout the vast body of scholarship on gender and physical culture, so too has there been a consistent fascination with the possibility for challenging or subverting male privilege within these exact same sites where it is otherwise seen to be produced and maintained. Principally, these arguments arise from research on women's participation in a range of sports and related activities. Here, there is compelling evidence of the potential for individual women to feel 'empowered' through the embodied experiences sport provides, as they learn to resist restrictive norms of femininity typically regulating the female body (e.g., Dowling, 2000). Meanwhile, other work has argued for the possibility of wider cultural change driven by women's sport, as the symbolic value of iconic female athletes challenges ideological beliefs about inherent male superiority (e.g., Heywood and Dworkin, 2003). This argument typically suggests that if women's and men's sporting accomplishments are equally valued, and women recognized as being equally capable of embodying the highly prized qualities associated with (particularly) competitive sports, then perhaps their example might have a progressive, transformative impact on wider culture. In essence, such women overtly challenge the notion that it is only men who can be brave, competitive, or strong.²

By the second decade of the 21st century, physical cultural practices in many parts of the Western world have undergone significant changes compared to their historical forebears, undoubtedly shifting ideals of gender constructed within and through them in the process. With particular respect to competitive sports, male and female athletes attend major global sports events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games in almost equal numbers (Donnelly and Donnelly, 2013); women increasingly participate in sports thought of as the most 'masculine' of all, including full-contact team games like rugby and ice hockey, or combat sports like boxing and mixed martial arts (Channon and Matthews, 2015; Finkel, 2014; Woodward, 2014); and a host of elite-level female athletes such as Hailey Wickenheiser (ice hockey), Ronda Rousey (mixed martial arts) and Serena Williams (tennis) have become well known internationally. Yet in spite of women's increasing prominence in these (and other) respects, their propensity to challenge traditional gender ideology remains stunted by the institutionalized segregation of men's and women's sport (McDonagh and Pappano, 2008). If the growth of women's sport has put the lie to ideals of female frailty (Dowling, 2000) and revealed that women can indeed embody athletic qualities previously thought exclusive to men, then the continuation of sex segregation has left something of a discursive 'back door' through which ideals of male athletic superiority can escape unscathed, retaining their influence over wider cultural belief systems. While allowing for the admission that women can be strong, competitive, resilient, etc., the culture of segregated sport continues to insist that they will never be able to be these things in ways which compare favorably to men. In other words, men remain positioned as the superior sex group by virtue of their assumed prowess in essentially often hypothetical, mixed-sex sporting competitions.

In this context, sex-integrated sport potentially offers a radical departure from such beliefs. In its simplest form, the fundamental 'promise' of sex integration lies in the fact that it

challenges us to reject *a priori* assumptions of male superiority and to entertain a very different vision of sex difference and gender relations to those typically constructed through traditional models of gendered physical culture. When women and men face each other as ostensible equals in athletic contests, when they train with one another in ways which are taken to be mutually beneficial, or when they must rely on one another's athletic prowess for the sake of team success, the usual gendered logic stressing inevitable male predominance stands to be challenged. While sex integration in sport and physical cultural settings can take many forms, and not all of these are equally radical in their relationship to the normative gendered culture of sport, the possibilities that these practices present for challenging the traditional sexual hierarchies embedded within sporting practices make this a fascinating area of research for sport scholars.

The question of sex integration in physical education has been debated by physical educationists (in the UK) for some time, as changes in government policies regarding co-educational classes drove academic interest since at least the 1980s (e.g., Evans, Lopez, Duncan and Evans, 1987; Hills and Crosston, 2012; Lines and Stidder, 2003). Yet in relation to sports, relatively little attention has been paid to sex integration, and despite the prominence of gender research in sport sociology since the 1970s, research on sex integration in sports only began to gather pace from the early-mid 1990s (e.g., Henry and Comeaux, 1999; Snyder and Ammons, 1993). Today, such enquiry features as a more prominent aspect of scholarship on sport and gender, with research publications since the mid-2000s proliferating across various national and sporting contexts. With reference to a selected number of publications from this emerging body of work, we now briefly address what we perceive to be central issues regarding both the promise and pitfalls of sex integration, before introducing the collected works comprising the rest of this special issue.

'The promise': Anti-sexism, hetero-sociality, and wider inclusivity through sex-integrated sport

One of the most problematic aspects of sex segregation in sport is that it reinforces the incorrect notion that *all* men and women are categorically different from each other with respect to specific dimensions of athletic performance. Sex segregation occurs in most (adult) sports, regardless of the actual ability of individual participants, based on the belief that for most such sports, men are 'naturally', and thus inevitably, superior athletes to women.³ Yet the premise of sex-integrated sports challenges this belief, instead assuming a broad overlap between *individual* men and women in many dimensions of athletic ability. Thus, when men and women compete against each other on equal terms, as happens in equestrian sport at all levels (Dashper, 2012a; de Haan, this volume), it becomes apparent that specific aspects of athletic performance are not fundamentally rooted in sex difference. Moreover, when women demonstrate an ability to compete with, or even defeat male opposition in sports which are typically not integrated, they stimulate reflection on otherwise entrenched beliefs about bodily capabilities, potentially inviting challenges to sexist assumptions that all women are always athletically inferior to all men (Anderson, 2008; McDonagh and Pappano, 2008; Wachs, 2005). Further still, when men and women face each other in traditionally male-

dominated and deeply masculinized contexts, such as combat sports ([Channon, 2014](#); [Fields, 2008](#); [McNaughton, 2012](#); [Maclean, this volume](#)), ideas that all women are 'weak' and in need of protection from men's inevitably superior strength and power can be radically debunked. And if, as outlined above, we accept that notions of male athletic superiority often help underpin wider social constructions of male hegemony, then such challenges to these assumptions take on a clear symbolic importance ([McDonagh and Papanno, 2008](#)).

Beside this political argument though, sex integration also has other benefits in relation to reworking gender relations within sport, principally regarding the establishment of positive, hetero-social relationships and greater inclusivity of non-binary people. Regarding this first point, [Anderson's \(2008\)](#) study of mixed-sex cheerleading illustrated how integration had transformed certain men's views of women's athleticism, leading to greater respect for female ability and leadership, ultimately helping them to befriend women and view them in more humanized ways than during their participation in male-only sports teams. [Maclean's](#) study of karate training revealed similar phenomena within mixed-sex clubs, wherein female karateka were accorded equal respect as their male counterparts ([2015](#); see also this volume). Indeed, some research showcased in this special issue suggests that when men and women play together in a variety of team sports, as is the case in mixed-doubles tennis, korfbal, and quidditch (see [Lake](#); [Gubby and Wellard](#); and [Segrave](#) respectively – all this volume), collaboration and teamwork can become more important than policing gender divisions and broadly help to establish positive, supportive, mutually respectful relationships between men and women.

Regarding the wider inclusivity embedded within sex-integrated sport, [Dashper's \(2012b\)](#) study of the experiences of gay men within equestrian sport suggests that sex integration can reduce tension and make for a more welcoming and accepting environment for gay men than is often seen within other competitive sporting contexts. Meanwhile, sex integrated sports may also provide spaces for those who are otherwise excluded by the binary sex classifications of 'male' and 'female' upon which almost all of modern sport is built – particularly intersex, transgender or otherwise non-binary individuals ([Buzuvis, 2011](#); see also [NUS, 2012](#)). By not requiring people to classify themselves within one of only two distinct sex categories, integrated sports have the potential to offer inclusive spaces for such athletes. Debates over the possibility of such inclusion are evidenced by [Tagg's](#) research on mixed netball ([2012, 2014](#)), [Travers' discussion](#) of softball and baseball ([2012](#); see also [Travers and Deri, 2011](#)), and [Pavlidis and Connor's](#) account of the controversies over inclusion policies in roller derby (this volume).

'The pitfalls': Resilient paternalism, male predominance and problematic implementation of sex-integrated sport

While sex integration has the potential to challenge some aspects of 'gender injustice' in sport ([Travers, 2008](#)), it should not be considered a panacea to the deep-rooted patterns of gender inequality that characterize sport and sporting practices. Firstly, in many contexts, the potential for transformative experiences in sex-integrated sports is thwarted or at least

slowed by the persistence of deep, historically-rooted and often taken-for-granted practices which marginalize women, rationalize the ascendancy of men into positions of authority, and normalize the unspoken behavioral etiquette associated with the wider societal expectation that 'boys don't hit girls' ([Channon and Jennings, 2013](#); [Snyder and Ammons, 1993](#); [Wachs, 2002](#); [Sailors, this volume](#)). Indeed, the reluctance of many men to engage meaningfully with women in mixed competition regularly sees the proposition framed as a 'lose-lose' situation, where defeating a woman is considered dishonorable while being defeated by one is emasculating ([Guérandel and Mennesson, 2007](#); [McNaughton, 2012](#)). This notion rests on the continuing logic of male superiority in integrated spaces, which otherwise often manifests in different rules for men and women within matches – typically those which 'handicap' men and provide women an apparently necessary competitive advantage (e.g., [Henry and Comeaux, 1999](#)). Thus, many aspects of how integrated sports are organized refuses the possibility that women might ever compete on a 'level playing field' with men. Even in those sports with a long history and widespread normalization of sex integration, behavioral norms that reinforce and support distinct gender roles – particularly those which centre on the paternalistic treatment of women by men – can be difficult to shift (e.g., [Lake, 2012](#)).

Secondly, although outstanding female performances against male opposition might be thought of as potentially transformative, it is difficult to imagine that this might become a normal state of affairs across any and all integrated sports, especially at higher levels of competition. As the global talent pool for female athletes remains disproportionately shallow owing to the well-evidenced drop-out from sport of adolescent girls (e.g., [Women's Sports Foundation, 2012](#)); while would-be athletic girls suffer from a lack of role models due to the near-invisibility of women's sport in the mainstream media (e.g., [Cooky et al., 2013](#)); and when the financial rewards for female athletes continue to be massively outstripped by those of their male counterparts (e.g., [Women's Sports Foundation, 2015](#)), we should hardly expect competitive performance gaps between elite men and women to shrink with the speed that scholars such as socio-biologist K.F. Dyer (1982) earlier predicted. Indeed, even in many sports where (human) strength and speed are not key contributors to athletic success, such as in equestrian sports, men still tend to dominate elite levels of competition and perform disproportionately well in comparison to their female peers, almost certainly owing to a range of social, economic and cultural factors embedded in contemporary sport ([Dashper, 2013](#)).

Within cultural contexts wherein athletic performance differences are most often interpreted as the expression of innate, biological limits, instances of male success in mixed competition are very likely to shore up the ideological construction of men's inevitable superiority over women. Moreover, while several scholars remain optimistic about the value of female success over male opponents in this respect, there is evidence that even these performances can be rationalized away, subsumed within dismissive or infantilizing discourse that neutralizes their subversive impact ([Wachs, 2005](#)). Indeed, many sex-integrated sports that espouse the rhetoric of equality and egalitarianism, like floorball, korfbal, roller derby, surfing, skydiving and snowboarding, very often in practice reproduce male dominance with respect to their organization, leadership, behavioral etiquette and differentiated styles of participation (see [Booth, 2002](#); [Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008](#); [Summerfield and White, 1989](#); [Thorpe 2005](#); see also [Larneby](#); [Gubby and Wellard](#); [Comley](#); [Pavlidis and Connor](#), all this volume).

Additionally, while sex integration may begin to challenge male hegemony symbolically and practically within sport, it must be noted that many women value female-only sports settings. This may be for religious or cultural reasons (e.g., [Dagkas et al., 2011](#); [Hylton, Long, Fletcher and Ormerod, 2015](#)) or because women simply desire separate space away from the male gaze and masculine domination which characterizes much of their everyday lives (Long, Dashper, Fletcher and Ormerod, 2015). Several researchers who advocate sex integration as one step towards greater gender justice in sport therefore also argue for the continuation of women-only sport spaces (e.g., McDonagh and Pappano, 2008; Tagg, 2014; Travers, 2012), making a distinction between ‘coercive’ and ‘voluntary’ segregation. Not without contention, these authors (and others) have argued for the abolition of all male-only sports contexts and competitions but suggest that women, as a subordinated group, should be able to choose between sex-integrated and sex-segregated sporting spaces. This is because “voluntary segregation aimed at increasing group standing is an acceptable social practice for minority groups but not for dominant groups” ([Travers, 2008: 93](#)). Thus, whilst sex integration within sport has potential to trouble masculine hegemony and contribute to greater gender justice, it may not be appropriate in all contexts and is not a simple solution to deeply ingrained and far-reaching sex inequality.

As is clearly evident from existing research and the essays within this collection, the goal of creating a socially inclusive sporting world that is both necessary and realistic, cannot be solely a matter of the right policy or the right time (see Pressland and Priyadharshini, this volume). If gender inequalities in all aspects of sport are to cease to be of significance, and if the promise of ‘sport for all’ is to be realised, then the analysis of policy needs to be related to broader relations of power in the culture of sport and society. Equal opportunities will remain unobtainable if the central tenet of the reproduction of male privilege is allowed to remain uncontested.

Important though as it is, gender equality is not the only marker of sporting inclusion. It is the way gender intersects with sexuality, ‘race’/ethnicity, social class, income, disability, age, religion and other factors that shapes sporting opportunities (see Winiarska et al., this volume). Thus, as has been argued elsewhere, for enduring public gender equality work to be possible, the conditions for it to become embedded in the ways people really think about social justice require more subtle forms of understanding than are currently available.

Overview of the special issue

With these controversies in mind, the remainder of this special issue of *Sport in Society* attempts to shed light on contemporary manifestations of both the promises and pitfalls of sex-integrated sport and physical culture. The 18 essays which follow have been grouped into four broad sections: *theorizing sex integration in sport and physical culture*; *integration in PE and youth sport*; *integrated non-contact sports*; and *integrated contact sports*. These sections were constructed to mirror what we believe to be an increasing scale of incredulity shown towards the prospect of sex-integrated sport. By this, we mean that the notion of integrated play may not be altogether unsettling to sport’s normative gender systems ‘in theory’; it is

not so unacceptable in youth sport, before adolescence hits and individuals are increasingly segregated out along gender lines; and while sex integration in adult sports might be highly atypical and potentially shocking prospect for many, it is most directly transgressive of gendered norms in sports which involve heavy levels of physical contact.

Thus, we intend for the arrangement of these essays to create something of an increasingly 'shocking' narrative as to the current practices of sex integration, vis-à-vis normative gender construction in sport. Assigning essays to these categories was a little difficult, and we acknowledge the dangers of compartmentalizing each contribution by recognizing that there was scope for cross-categorization in some cases. This is both a strength and weakness of the process, which was ultimately done for clarity of readership, but may underplay the interconnectedness of the issues expressed herein. As a final note on the makeup of this collection, we have included here four short, 'Research Insight' essays.⁴ The purpose of these was to offer an opportunity for early career researchers to showcase their work, and due to their shorter format (4,000-5,000 words) provide an accessible outlet for research dissemination alongside the larger, full-length research articles comprising the other 14 contributions.

Section 1: Theorising sex integration in sport and physical culture

Section 1 begins with Pamela Sailors' essay "Off the Beaten Path: should women compete against men?". In her essay Sailors considers three questions: Are women capable of competing against men in sporting events? If they aren't, might there be good reasons to encourage them to make the attempt anyway? If they are, might there be good reasons to prohibit such competition? Sailors proposes four possible answers to the question of whether women are capable of competing against men: 1) No, so there's no point in talking about it; 2) No, but they should make the attempt anyway; 3) Yes, so mix all the competition and get on with it; and 4) Yes, but there are good reasons not to allow it. Sailors is clear that these are meant as provocations, and ought not to be considered as sacrosanct. She warns that scholars and practitioners must not lose sight of the fact that "equality through sex integration will require more than good intentions and a coherent theory so long as cultural ideas about male superiority persist" (p. XXX).

Following this, in her essay "'Preserving la difference': The elusiveness of sex segregated sport" Lindsay Parks-Pieper critically explores the use of medico-scientific technologies as a means of differentiating between men and women. Parks-Pieper suggests that sport authorities, when faced with the realization that girls and women were encroaching into (male) sporting spaces, and demonstrating many of the traits that previously signified 'maleness', made a number of attempts to reassert the gender order by, among other things, seeking ways to scientifically maintain a division in competition. She states that, "Widespread social anxieties, medico-scientific, ideologies, and sporting norms thereby coalesced, resulting in numerous efforts to uphold separation" (p. XXX). Of these mechanisms, Parks-Pieper traces the IAAF's and IOC's use of anatomical examinations, chromatin assessments, DNA testing, and hormonal analyses in their attempt to circumscribe womanhood. She argues

how, despite attempts to delineate a division of sex proving arbitrary, sport authorities have repeatedly attempted to draw a concrete line between men and women to uphold a sex-segregated sporting paradigm.

Section 2: Integration in PE and youth sport

Joaquim Piedra, Gonzalo Ramírez-Macías, Francis Ries, Augusto R. Rodríguez-Sánchez and Catherine Phipps open this section with their essay “Homophobia and heterosexism: Spanish Physical Education teachers’ perceptions”. Piedra et al note that PE is often thought of as a heteronormative environment, despite current studies highlighting the existence of positive changes in sport towards sexual diversity. Piedra et al provide a case study of Spain, where studies into PE teachers’ attitudes towards sexual minorities are rare. Their essay demonstrates that overt homophobia, especially the use of homophobic language, remains prevalent in Spanish PE lessons. They warn that this homophobia is institutionalized, with some teachers (mainly male) joining other students in expressing homophobic language: “homosexually-themed language is still a well-used instrument in classrooms to discriminate against gays and lesbians. Some teachers are not fully aware of its effect, since many do not use inclusive language in their teaching practice, with homosexually themed language more prominent amongst male teachers”. (p.XXX).

Laura Gubby and Ian Wellard’s essay “Sporting equality and gender neutrality in korfbal” also explores institutional inequality, but their focus is on deconstructing the perceived egalitarianism of korfbal. Their analysis shows that while the sport is presented as sex-integrated, egalitarian and meritocratic, myths about male athletic prowess and female subordination remain entrenched within player attitudes. They argue that, while during fieldwork it was clear that male domination was rarely evident in terms of the vocal nature of the game, the physicality and competitiveness of players, or their general ability and skill, when interviewed players still constructed gender in traditional ways. The authors also witnessed a disassociation between players on and off the court. They argue that while korfbal was seen to offer a space where there were possibilities for sporting equality, its influence beyond the court was less apparent.

Following this Karin Grahn and Viveka Berggren Torell’s essay “Negotiations of gender discourse: Experiences of co-education in a Swedish sport initiative for children” explores how children perceive and construct gender in two settings: a Swedish government-financed sports initiative and in leisure-time sports activities. Their findings identify how many of the children normalize through reproduction traditional views of boys/men as being superior at sports. However, they also uncover some instances of resistance, whereby some actively objected to this dominant discourse. They identify differences between the two settings. They suggest that there was greater potential for the children in the initiative to experience sport in less sex-segregated ways than in leisure-time sport. They attribute this to the practice of co-education, whereby girls and boys’ participation together is increasingly normalized. They conclude that, “there was room for negotiation in the children’s descriptions of leisure sports and in girls’ and boys’ discussions of playing together or separately ... on some occasions,

traditional gender patterns were (re)produced ... on other occasions, there was potential for the children in the soccer project to experience soccer in less gender-segregated manners than in leisure-time soccer.” (p.XXX).

Formal vs leisure-time sport is the focus of Marie Larneby’s Research Insight essay into floorball. In “Transcending gender hierarchies? Young people and floorball in Swedish school sport” Larneby challenges the supposition that floorball has not been masculinized in its transition from spontaneous activity to organized sport. On the contrary, Larneby argues that training in a mixed-sex group seemed to actualize a need to dichotomize and construct distinct groups of boys and girls, meaning that a ‘boys are better than girls’ discourse prevailed. Unlike Grahn et al who noted a difference in attitudes towards gender difference between formal and leisure time sport settings, Larneby argues that the culture of sex segregation in leisure time floorball diffused into formal settings. Larneby presents data to suggest that as boys and girls become more accustomed to sex integrated sport settings they begin to value the contribution of each other more, thereby dispelling myths of irrefutable sex differences.

Section 3: Integrated non-contact sports

Section 3 opens with Rob Lake’s essay “‘Guys don’t whale away at the women’: etiquette and gender relations in contemporary mixed-doubles tennis”. Building off historical research that examined the social constructions of male-female differences in behavioral etiquette in mixed-doubles tennis from before World War II, this essay examines the extent to which “traditional” gendered norms related to court positioning, tactics and playing roles/expectations have been challenged as an outcome of post-war feminist advances and broader movements toward gender equity. Analyzing instructional guides and coaching manuals published from the 1960s-80s, alongside contemporary tennis blogs and instructional websites aimed at offering advice on mixed-doubles tactics and etiquette, Lake discovered that while a key and possibly growing demographic of advanced-level female players expected neutral and unbiased play from men – essentially, urging men to accept female teammates/opponents as equals and to *not* hold back – male players at both recreational and elite levels continued to express discomfort with doing so, despite openly acknowledging how this might be considered ‘offensive’ or ‘insulting’. Thus, within the context of the burgeoning ‘crisis of masculinity’ (MacInnes, 1998), men were pushed to adopt a sophisticated ‘hybridized masculinity’, “[blending] orthodox masculinity with more inclusive – essentially, female/gay-friendly – identities to continue asserting their social dominance”, yet assuage public critiques of sexism in tennis (p.XXX).

This is followed by Amy Pressland and Esther Priyadharshini’s essay “Doing femininities and masculinities in a ‘feminized’ sporting arena: The case of mixed-sex cheerleading” in which they utilize personal narratives of three competitive cheerleaders in the UK to question the educative and transformative potential of mixed sex sports. Through a critical feminist lens they question whether such promise can ever be attained and what the obstacles to its attainment may be. Their conclusions are threefold: 1) having experience of mixed-sex team

membership can have a progressive influence on the gender narratives and performances of both male and female participants; 2) mixed sex teams are not a panacea to rectify gender stereotypes and inequalities, and 3) if the implicit transformative potential of mixed sex cheerleading is to be fully realized, then explicit organizational, promotional and structural changes to the sport itself will be needed.

Equestrian sport remains one of few sports where men and women routinely compete together. This is the focus of Donna de Haan, Popi Sotiriadou and Ian Henry's essay "The lived experience of sex integrated sport and the construction of athlete identity within the Olympic and Paralympic Equestrian disciplines". The essay presents data from interviews conducted with riders, performance managers and support staff of the British Equestrian Team. The authors uncover a contradiction between existing literature and their data. They acknowledge that existing research is laden with gendered references, though analysis of their data shows an "absence of gender as an identity in the way participants see themselves and others" (p.XXX). The authors use this to suggest that, from a participant's perspective, equestrian sport might be described as gender neutral.

Following this, in "Mixed-sex in sport for development: a pragmatic and symbolic device. The case of touch rugby for forced migrants in Rome" Micol Pizzolati and Davide Sterchele trace the development of a touch rugby team, created by the Italian voluntary-based association Liberi Nantes, especially for female forced migrants. The authors report that, as a result of the success of a male equivalent team, Liberi Nantes wanted to create a similar space where women could come together, socialize, increase their social networks and, most importantly, feel safe. Originally established as a sex-segregated space, the authors document how the organizers took the decision to make the team mixed-sex. By drawing upon the accounts of activists and volunteers they examine the practical and symbolic reasons for the strategic use of mixed-sex sport and its implications. They highlight how its mixed-sex nature contributes to nourishing a wider rhetoric of social mixing and celebration of diversity: "The mixed-sex dimension of touch rugby is part of this totemic representation since it contributes to this subversive symbolism of overcoming social hierarchies and boundaries by fighting segregation and favoring intersectional social mixing" (p.XXX).

The final contribution in this section is a Research Insight from Cassie Comley. In "'We have to establish our territory': How women surfers 'carve out' gendered spaces within surfing" Comley presents a case study of how female surfers in Southern California cope with and contest their marginalized status by, among other things, establishing separate spaces from men. She argues that the legitimacy of female surfers is often called into question through the male habitus of surfing. She documents accounts of how men would question the skill and legitimacy of female surfers and how these experiences have politicized the waves to the extent that women surfers felt a 'burden of representation'. Many of the women sought to separate themselves from mixed-sex environments, preferring instead to establish alternative spaces. Comley warns that separation "may not be challenging broader cultural beliefs about women and men, but does create a space where women feel empowered and can unite over womanhood" (p.XXX).

Section 4: Integrated contact sports

Jeffrey Segrave opens this section with “Challenging the gender binary: the fictive and real world of quidditch” wherein he argues that dominant forms of sport are bimodal in gender classification, a construction that creates an ideology of male superiority and marginalizes women and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex individuals (GLBITs). One recent example of a sport that confronts traditional gendering is quidditch. The majority of readers outside the USA will think of quidditch as existing only in the fantasy world of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter book and movie series. However, it also exists in the ‘real’-world as ‘muggle’ quidditch and is gender inclusive. Segrave draws upon a literary analysis of Rowling’s portrayal of quidditch as well as personal testimonies of muggle quidditch players to consider the ways in which both formats challenge the dominant forms of institutionalized sport and present an alternative structure for gender participation and identification. He suggests that the impact of fantasy quidditch should not be under-estimated as it “posits the assumption of gender equity in sport to a whole generation of boys and girls and men and women” whilst operating as “incidents of resistance and emancipatory moments that demonstrate that sport, like all institutions, is not a ‘seamless totalitarian system’.” (p.XXX)

In “Challenging the gender binary? Male basketball practice players’ views of female athletes and women’s sports” Janet Fink, Nicole LaVoi and Kristine Newhall utilize Kane’s (1995) continuum theory to examine the effects of extended sex-integrated playing experiences on male practice players’ attitudes towards female athletes, female athleticism, and women’s sports more generally. They warn that few boys and men (or girls and women) are provided sex-integrated sport opportunities and thus, the opportunity to experience the sport continuum is rarely realized. Their findings further illuminate the complexity of gender relations in sport as the men simultaneously experienced and articulated a gender continuum while reinforcing a gender binary which kept their own power and privilege in sport intact. Thus, “while sex-integrated sport has the potential to challenge gender ideologies, it appears the strong and pervasive patriarchy of male-centered, male run, and male dominated sport culture makes it difficult for its full positive potential to be realized” (p.XXX). The authors conclude that if more sex-integrated opportunities were available in youth sport settings they could provide early and consistent interruptions of the gender binary that might contribute to stronger mechanisms for feminist resistance.

In “‘They kick you because they are not able to kick the ball’: normative conceptions of sex difference and the politics of exclusion in mixed-sex football” Aleksandra Winiarska, Lucy Jackson, Lucy Mayblin and Gill Valentine present a case study of an anti-discrimination football tournament in Warsaw, Poland. The authors write that the tournament has a variety of anti-discriminatory aims, including anti-racism, anti-homophobia and anti-sexism, meaning that it is well-placed to discuss the intersectionality of inequality. The authors ask whether initial perceptions of sex difference can be overcome via sustained sex-integrated sports involvement. They argue that, despite the tournament’s aims, male perceptions of biological sex difference were unavoidable, and hindered play and group integration. More specifically, they identify how perceptions of sex-differences were reinforced through normative assumptions expressed by participants, which often lead to the confirmation of divisions –

and also inequalities – between men and women. Over time however, they demonstrated a marked change in player attitudes. They conclude that, for the men, while participating with and against women “at first seemed something unusual or even unthinkable ... their presence became a natural and obvious fact” (p.XXX); a pattern that was recognized by the women who noted “a positive experience in comparison with other social milieus, where they experienced surprise, suspicion or rejection” (p.XXX).

In “Men in a ‘women only’ sport? Contesting gender relations and sex integration in roller derby” Adele Pavlidis and James Connor note how roller derby is primarily played by women, with men having been restricted to support roles since its revival stage in the early 2000s. However, men and gender diverse skaters are increasingly playing the sport, in both mixed-sex and sex-segregated teams. This has created deep divisions within the derby community for two main reasons: 1) the legitimacy of men in a perceived women’s space; and 2) the playing of a full-contact sport with men against women on the track. The authors argue that the main challenge to successful sex-integrated sport is reducing, or eliminating altogether, discrimination, and this will not happen until “one of the most obvious, visible, valorized and re-produced binaries of gender is broken – that of *sport* and *women’s sport*” (p.XXX). They suggest that roller derby can go some way to realizing gender equality, but its contribution will likely be limited given the sport’s “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” (p.XXX).

Danielle DiCarlo’s contribution “Playing like a girl? The negotiation of gender and sexual identity among female ice hockey athletes on male teams” is the first of two Research Insights in this section. She opens her essay by suggesting that the gendering of ice hockey space is not new, but there have been numerous well known cases of women playing on, or attempting to play on, male ice hockey teams. She documents how women have migrated into these sport spaces through the development of female teams and leagues, but also through their participation in male teams and leagues. DiCarlo’s contribution is different to the majority in this collection as she presents experiences of women who have already participated in sex-integrated teams before transitioning to sex-segregated teams. She argues that the women’s experiences of participating in sex-integrated environments influenced how they construct and negotiate ideas about femininity and female bodies in sex-segregated environments. She documents how the female athletes “exhibited neither a complete adherence to nor rejection of the ideal femininity within their constructions of gender” (p.XXX). For these women negotiating gender was inextricably linked to sexuality, as they “constructed their (heterosexual) identities through comparison of self with homosexual female teammates and their narratives around heteronormativity” (p.XXX).

The collection comes to a close with Chloe Maclean’s Research Insight “Friendships worth fighting for: Bonds between women and men karate practitioners as sites for deconstructing gender inequality”. Unlike many principally team sports, Maclean argues that sex-integrated karate practice not only challenges dominant expectations/interpretations of women’s bodies, but can also situate women and men within mutually respectful, cherished relationships which diverge from conventional sexualized and unequal ways of ‘doing gender’.

Indeed, for Maclean, mixed-sex friendships in karate training offer a unique site for exploring the subversion of gender norms, ideals, and hierarchies on the basis that the “sex-integrated practice of karate elevates the respect given to women by simultaneously disrupting both ideas of women’s bodies as primarily sexual objects subordinate in ability to men ... and of men and women as having, offering, and wanting distinctly different qualities in their intimate relations” (p.XXX). For Maclean, unlike the vast majority of other sporting environments, in karate, “mixed-friendships are built on mutually supportive grounds, with an embedded mutual respect for one-another as athletes and friends” (p.XXX).

To many critical scholars of sport and physical culture the issues raised in this collection will be familiar; resonating with a collective frustration about the unfulfilled promises of sport. The range of case studies and discussions presented here not only reaffirm the contemporary relevance of sex integration debates, but also articulate the possibility of sport acting as a legitimate space for political struggle, resistance and change, and as a modality for ‘self-actualization and the reaffirmation of previously abject identities’ (Carrington, 2010: 36). The collection is ambitious and covers a lot of ground, theoretically, empirically and geographically, but inevitably possesses limitations in its scope and trajectory and therefore must, as with all scholarship, be seen as part of a broader discourse. We thank the authors for their contributions and hope their essays spark interest and provoke further discussion.

Notes

- ¹ The symbolic work done by gendered patterns of participation/exclusion (i.e., associating men with power) extend beyond the realm of competitive sport. For instance, in many forms of dance there are male and female styles or roles, which largely play upon the association of men with solidity and physical strength and women with lightness and physical beauty; fitness regimes advertized to men typically involve building muscle mass and strength while for women they focus on toning rather than building muscle, and reducing weight and size. The consistent implication here is that men primarily ought to be larger, stronger, and more capable of exerting physical power than women.
- ² An alternative vision forwarded by some sports feminists suggests that, rather than trying to illustrate how some female athletes can live up to sporting ideals largely centred on attributes wherein male bodies typically outperform females (i.e., strength, speed, etc. – see Foddy & Savulescu, 2011), it may be more productive to increase the cultural prestige attached to sports wherein females, on average, tend to do better than males, or where sexual differences are less pronounced (i.e., those based on flexibility and balance, or ultra-endurance events – see Chatterjee & Laudato, 1996). Although this argument provides an interesting counter to that developed around women’s increasing involvement in ‘masculine’ sport, it offers no substantial departure from binary thinking about gender which underpins sexist hierarchies supported by masculinist sports culture.
- ³ With the exception, of course, being those sports wherein women are thought to have a natural advantage of their own, such as specific gymnastic events, as outlined in the endnote above.
- ⁴ Research Insight essays also feature in Dashper and Fletcher (2013).

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