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### Just Sports or Women's Sports?

Everything has a category and sports is no exception to this rule--identified as both the subject noun and the adjective. Each sport has a name, such as basketball, soccer, and tennis, and women get to be the adjective in the sports they play. This presents itself in the slightly altered names such as women's basketball, women's soccer, and women's tennis. However, the assumption most spectators make about the level of involvement of men in relation to women in sports just may be wrong. The increased involvement of women in sports has been astounding since the enactment of Title IX in 1972. As shown by information from the American Association of University Women: between 1971 and 1972, 294,015 women participated in high school athletics compared to over 3.5 million male athletes, and by 2007 the number of high school women participating in sports was just over 3 million, with men around 4.3 million (Strautman). If women are very nearly on par with men in athletic participation, why is their media coverage significantly less? Furthermore, when female athletes do get the representation that they deserve they are often faced with over-sexualizing themselves to get coverage. Male athletes in the same position are only required to wear their uniforms. The portrayal of female athletes and the media coverage they receive directly corresponds with the acceptance and popularity of women's sports in modern day society.

When discussing the differential treatment between female and male representations in sports one must acknowledge first how this topic became relevant, and a great amount of credit must be paid to Title IX. Title IX came into effect as part of the Education Amendments on June 23, 1972, stating that: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to any discrimination under any

educational programs or activity receiving federal assistance (Valentin 1)." This applies to entire educational institutions, hence the application of Title IX towards athletics, despite the fact that a very small amount of federal funds go towards athletic programs. This section of the Education Amendments is not implemented flawlessly, as many women are still underrepresented in dominant academic fields, such as math and science, and colleges and universities still spend the majority of their athletics budget on men's sports. Results, however, are still being achieved. After twenty-five years of implementation, the U.S. Department of Education reported, "Women now make up the majority of students in America's colleges and universities in addition to making up the majority of recipients of master's degrees" (Title IX: 25 Years of Progress). It is safe to say that Title IX, while not yet achieving its pinnacle impact, has crossed some barriers and laid the groundwork for women to become successful in athletics.

Media outlets across the globe hailed the 2012 Summer Olympics in London as the Women's Olympics with the recurrent phrase, "if women were their own country..." Women were forty-four percent of the competing athletes in the 2012 games, improving from 1972, the year of Title IX, when only twenty-two percent of events allowed female participation, and just under fifteen percent of the participants were women (IOC 4). The Islamic nations of Saudi Arabia, Brunei, and Qatar allowed female athletic involvement for the first time in the 2012 Olympics as well. Not only was the participation from these lady athletes greater this time around, but so was the amount of medals. In the three traditionally powerhouse medal winners of the Olympics: the United States, China, and Russia, women out-medaled men in a situation in which there were thirty fewer medals to be won (Jenkins). Sports that are played in American universities, such as soccer and basketball, exemplified title IX's success where the United States women's national teams won consecutive gold medals in each sport.

The common saying 'with success comes a price' applies here. Several cases occurred during these Olympic games in which women who appeared to perform beyond perceivable results faced accusations of drug use and even underwent persecution about their gender. This directly results in their performances exceeding the realm of which women are expected to perform. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Judith Butler observes the relationship between sexual gender construction and society stating, "feminist theorists have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experience" (1). Subsequently, predetermined gender roles in society influence how the notion of a "normal" female performance in athletics is understood. Sixteen year old Chinese swimmer Yi Shiwen won the gold medal in the 400 meter individual medley, smashing the world record in four minutes and twenty-eight seconds. The attention grabbing headline, though, was the fact that she had a faster final 50 meter split than the men's gold medal winner on the same night, Ryan Lochte. The executive director of The World Swimming Coaches Association John Leonard brought to head criticism of this athlete as he declared, "Any time someone has looked like superwoman in the history of our sport they have later been found guilty of doping" (Wilson). Mr. Leonard clearly falls within Butler's assertion that gender is socially constructed, and that gender performance and gender identity is established through recognized discourse (12).

Judith Butler's theories are also applicable when addressing the situation of South African 800-meter runner Caster Semenya. Semenya had her biological sex questioned after she achieved a time of 1:55.45, two seconds ahead of second place in the 2009 World Championships. Her appearance, in combination with a deep voice and an outstanding athletic performance, elicited questions about her sex from her competitors. Culture's governing by conventions that regulate the bonds of kinship itself requires disciplinary action against any means that effectively end that

production guided Semenya's competitors inquiries about her gender (Butler 7). The standards about gender norms set by society dictated Semenya's competition to question her biological sex, as her difference was seen as a threat. Although the governing body for track and field, the IAAF, banned gender testing in 1991 and the International Olympic Committee banned it in 2000, it was quietly requested that South Africa perform a complex series of tests to determine Semenya's gender. It was discovered and released without the initial knowledge or consent of Semenya, that while she has external female genitalia, she has internal testes, no uterus or ovaries, and elevated levels of testosterone (Epstein). Semenya's situation brought up the question, what do athletic organizations do when an athlete's biological sex does not fit within the simple sex binary of an XX or a XY chromosome? Ultimately, the decision in these circumstances allowed Semenya to compete. Butler addresses the problem that arose in this scenario with her thoughts of binary genders and the heterosexual contract when she articulates the idea that the "system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed through the cultivation of bodies into concrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions" (7).

Beyond the questions of legitimate female athletic performances, coverage from sports media outlets that focus solely on a female athlete's ability is few and far between. According to Dr. Nicole M. LaVoi from *Women Talk Sports* in five years, the span of 2004 to March 2009, women had only appeared on the cover of five of 168 ESPN Magazine issues (Strautman). On these five magazine covers the obvious sexualization of all of the women demonstrated itself through their posing, wardrobe, and often times raunchy headlines--without an ounce of the female athlete's professional attire in sight. These female athletes are being portrayed and used as sexual objects, while male athletes are rewarded with a display of their resolve, skill, and ability to persevere. In fact, when executing a search on Google.com images of ESPN Magazine covers,

only two images of men out of hundreds appeared without their uniform, one of which was of the swimmer Michael Phelps, whose uniform would not be shown in shots above the waist. This is a prime example of gender oppression as stated by Ann E. Cudd, wherein oppression is institutionalized harm perpetuated by groups benefiting from said harm (Brackins, 6 Sept. 2012). Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts *Objectification Theory* also heavily comes into play.

*Objectification Theory* suggests that women and girls typically acculturate to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves (Fredrickson 173). Thus it stands to reason that female athletes rationalize and accept the over-sexualized presentation of themselves by simply accepting it as the display that spectators wish to see. Furthermore, Fredrickson and Roberts argue that, "bodies exist within social and cultural contexts, and hence are also constructed through socio-cultural practices and discourses" (174). WNBA athlete Candace Parker exemplifies this in her appearance in ESPN the Magazine. Parker earned the privilege of being the first pregnant woman to grace the cover of a men's sporting magazine, and in turn was rewarded with a gregarious pun on her pregnancy with the subtitle, "How Big Can Candace Parker Get?" Which begs the question, would Parker be worth a front page story if she were not with child? Not only did the author address her current physical appearance right out of the gate, the first sentence of the article attends to her 'normal' physical appearance stating, "Candace Parker is beautiful. Breathtaking, really, with flawless skin, endless legs and a C cup she is proud of, but never flaunts" (Glock). The reader automatically focuses on Parker's exterior due to the headline and lead-in of the article, bringing the focus to her body, not her athletic ability. The commonality among all forms of sexual objectification is the widespread occurrence of being treated as an anthology of body parts valued primarily for its consumption by others

(174). One would explain Parker's co-operation with the magazine's portrayal of herself as a psychological consequence springing from a lifelong exposure to objectification.

Not only are female athletes subjected to oppression via objectification, they are also subject to oppression when they do not fit within the traditional beauty standards in order to be objectified. The top ranked American weightlifter of both men and women, Sarah Robles, could not garner a sponsorship from any major athletic equipment company for the 2012 Olympics, despite the high probability of her winning a medal at the games. Robles lived off of a measly \$400 a week stipend from the US Weightlifting federation, forced to survive off of food banks and donations to acquire the necessary 3,000-4,000 calories she needs each day to train effectively (Rosenberg). Conversely, Nike, the same company that refused to sponsor Robles, has "Nike Weightlifting Athletes" that they have endorsed, with both female endorsees weighing around 140 pounds lifting a maximum of 120 kilograms; to contrast, Robles weighs in at about 275 pounds and lifts about 150 kilograms. With the most subtle and deniable sexualized evaluation enacted through the male gaze, Robles physical form does not fit within the standards required to be objectified, thus is not seen as an adequate endorsee for an athletic sponsorship (175). Robles falls victim to the institutionalized oppression that penalizes those who do not follow precisely among a predetermined decree.

Women's athletics are a mere after thought when it comes to live television airtime and commentary from sports talk shows as well. In regards to sport talk shows men make up 96.3% of airtime, with women's sports receiving only about 1.6% of airtime, and gender neutral topics rounding out the final 2.1%. Additionally, the majority of the airtime given to women's sports are marginalized to the rolling ticker at the bottom of the screen, the only meager acknowledgement being that of a final score. Moreover, when female athletes are displayed on television commentators tended to use lower level athletic characteristics than used on male athletes

(Strautman). Accordingly, in order for a female athlete to gain recognition and popularity she must fit within the guidelines of predetermined physical and athletic expectations set for women; and if she does fit within those guidelines, she is further required to sexualize and objectify herself. The day these standards change will be the day that the distinction between male and female athletic events is eliminated and gender is not considered in the evaluation of athletic performance.

As previously indicated, despite the ever growing involvement of women in athletics, the respect and acceptance of their athletic abilities and achievement is not yet on par with their male counterparts. The insistent drug testing or gender testing after a woman excels at the sport she has dedicated her life to and the sexualization of women in sports media that hardly breach their athletic prowess are only a few of the reminders. For female athletics to reach the acceptance of men's athletics one might be inclined to suggest that the representation and respect that they receive should be equal as well.

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