# INFORMAL PROTEST THROUGH EVERYDAY PERFORMANCE: UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S RUGBY AS DISSENT

**A Dissertation**
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**INFORMAL PROTEST THROUGH EVERYDAY PERFORMANCE: UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S RUGBY AS DISSENT**

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This research is an examination of private, informal forms of protest. I conducted in-depth interviews with female adult rugby players about their personal and political experiences with contact sports and gender. I suggest that political process theorists (see Tilly and Tarrow 2007) broaden their conventional understanding of politics to include power relationships inside everyday interactions.

The 47 athletes interviewed in this study, drawn from 9 adult women's rugby clubs across the United States, attach contentious meaning to their sport. Both gendered bodies and gendered selves are produced through athletic practices. The symbols of organized sport practices and physical strength are among the most widely used and easily identifiable cultural indicators of masculine authority. Women's involvement in contact sports such as football, ice hockey and rugby is still widely considered nonconformist behavior. If we understand gender as a social accomplishment, following West and Zimmerman (1987), we can see that female contact-sport athletes are constantly required to justify their breach of gender norms to the people around them (as well as to themselves).

Most of the players in this study explicitly describe their rugby experiences in terms of a larger collective effort to challenge dominant cultural institutions. While the majority of them express mixed feelings about being identified as "political" actors at all, they describe their experiences in terms of structural gender

inequality, express frustration with it, and articulate a determination to work for widespread social change by performing alternative gender identities. These findings support and build on Rupp and Taylor's analysis of drag queens (2003). These athletes are engaged in creating change inside small communities, immediate social networks, and close relationships – without the direction of the formal movement organizations which have long been the focus of social movement scholarship. This study contributes to the explanatory value of the political process approach to social movements while also bringing attention to the important part that proponents of women's sports currently play in the redistribution of power across gender lines. It also contributes to the feminist critique of the separative self (Keller 1986, England 1993).

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alexa Yesukevich attended primary and secondary schools in Portugal, Saudi Arabia, and five different American states, graduating from high school in Chicago. She then received her undergraduate education at Mount Holyoke College. Alexa earned an MA in Politics at Brandeis University before beginning graduate studies at Cornell University.

for Emily

(not the product as much as its completion)

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## INTRODUCTION

> *We have had high school clinics in the area and have had tons of girls come out who are interested [in playing rugby]. That's really going to make them feel better about themselves. And they can say, hey, why can't I be the top scientist in some field even though it's dominated by men? I've done this and I can do other stuff. (Casey)*

> *I think it [the experience of playing rugby] carries over into the workforce, yes. We can put on our lab coats and be a scientist, or be a physician, or be a nurse, or be a clerk, or do whatever. (Marta)*

This research is an examination of private, informal forms of feminist protest through in-depth interviews with female athletes. I suggest that the conventional understanding of politics be broadened to include power relationships inside everyday interactions. This allows us to recognize that sustained and deliberate dissent, intended to lead to social change, can take place inside relationships and in everyday interactions as forcefully and effectively as it can take place in the streets. The athletes interviewed in this study are female rugby players who attach contentious meanings to their athletic involvement. They are engaged in effecting change inside small communities, immediate social networks, and close relationships – without the direction of the formal movement organizations which have long been the focus of social movement scholarship. The main research question in this project is: how does this informal form of contention fit together

with what we already know about formal, public forms of protest?

This project is based on 47 in-depth interviews with female rugby players. Although recreational athletics might seem far from the usual purview of social movement research, women's sports have been the focus of a well-defined formal movement in recent years. Women's team contact sports are an ideal setting in which to study non-formal, “everyday” protest. To begin with, the symbols of organized sport practices and physical strength are among the most widely used and easily identifiable cultural indicators of masculine authority. Both gendered bodies and gendered selves are produced through athletic practices. This study contributes to the explanatory value of political process theory while also bringing attention to the important part that proponents of women's sports currently play in the redistribution of power across gender lines. Furthermore, women's involvement in contact sports (for example, rugby, football, ice hockey, boxing, and the martial arts) has been growing, but it is still widely considered nonconformist behavior.

If we understand gender as a social accomplishment, following West and Zimmerman (1987), we can see that female contact-sport athletes are constantly required to justify their breach of gender norms to the people around them (as well as to themselves). This makes their choice to participate more salient to their identities, and it raises the likelihood that they have consciously considered how their actions relate to their broader social context.

In this heightened political context, is the simple presence of a woman in a team contact sport partly as an act of protest? In interviews with competitive adult women’s

rugby players about their very personal (and often political) experiences with contact sports and gender, I have found that many players explicitly describe their rugby experiences in terms of a larger collective effort to challenge dominant cultural institutions. They seem in many important ways to be part of a social movement, working together for women's inclusion in the male-dominated realm of sport. At the same time, the majority of these women choose not to call themselves feminists, and they express mixed feelings about being identified as "political" actors at all. Yet they use distinctive language taken from feminist movements to describe their experiences. For example, several subjects cite statistics on the gender wage gap and on women's representation in Fortune 500 boardrooms. Others complain about a lack of national attention to women's concerns, demonstrated by insufficient rape laws and insufficient Title IX enforcement, while also describing their own frustration at watching men's rugby teams receive substantial corporate sponsorship (something still uncommon in women's rugby). Almost all of these interviewees describe their experiences in terms of structural gender inequality, express frustration with it, and articulate a determination to work for widespread social change, but their formal political commitments and their approaches to enacting change vary.

This dissertation is written in two sections: in the first section I explore rugby culture and in the second I investigate the relationship between rugby and politics. The project's theoretical base, literature review, and methodology are presented in Chapter One. Chapter Two is a description of the field. In it I ask: what is rugby? How is it played? Who are the players I interviewed, and what is their experience of the game

itself? And what kind of people are they? I provide an abbreviated ethnographic account of a rugby game, as well as short biographies of four representative players. I also give a detailed description and discussion of my sample.

In the third chapter I turn to the meanings that players themselves derive from this part of their lives. I ask what rugby means to these rugby players. What kind of people do they feel it makes them into? An examination of the data yields three notable themes that address this question of identity. In Chapter Three I explore these themes and the contradictions they reveal, and I provide a working model of identity formation in this context.

A major aspect of rugby identity is oppositional. A kind of defiance is woven into the personas these players display. Rugby's challenge to authority, and specifically to the mainstream gender system, is the subject of Chapter Four. Here I describe the nature of this challenge and its expression in the context of rugby. In my data we see several configurations of this challenge: we see individuals challenging the larger gender system, and we see individuals challenging themselves and other individuals. At the same time we see the larger culture of women's rugby challenging gender as a whole and challenging individual players and individuals outside of rugby. In this chapter I lay out a theoretical framework for understanding how gender works – what are these players challenging? – as well as exploring the ways they go about waging this challenge.

Like most contemporary feminist theorists, I treat gender as a social accomplishment rather than a character trait (Risman 2004; Risman 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987); I treat gender identities as by necessity both incomplete and

inconsistent (Rudman and Glick 2001; Connell 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987); and I emphasize that living in the context of gender is really a process of negotiating conflicting pressures – pressures that are very evident in the context of women's rugby. In my data, I see three distinct strategies individual players take for negotiating these pressures: (1) acquiring male privilege at the individual level without directly questioning structural constraints, (2) calling attention to the injustices of structural constraints, and (3) professing to ignore structural constraints (a strategy that is perhaps impossible to realize). In this chapter I describe these strategies, which can be understood both as identities and as various configurations of compromises, and I ask what it really means for an individual to challenge gender. I end Chapter Four with Reger's assertion (in Reger, Meyers, and Einwohner 2008) that identity work is, literally, hard work.

With Chapter Five I move away from a direct analysis of rugby culture into a discussion of how this culture and the individuals inside it contribute to our understanding of social change. What motivates these rugby players to behave as they do? Are they engaging in protest? Should we see their behavior as collective action? Contention? Social movement activity? I begin this chapter with summaries of major elements of the formalized US movement for women's sports. I discuss the significance of access to the body as a contested resource. I also show notable commonalities of language and symbols in rugby, formal feminist movements, and other social movement discourse. A major premise for this part of my analysis is drawn from Rupp and Taylor's (2003) criteria for evaluating performance as contention.

Later in the chapter, I return to the data to discuss why rugby players, who seem

to have so much in common with feminists, choose not to identify themselves with politics or political interests. I claim that this distinction, although it is certainly important, should not preclude these women from being recognized as notable agents of social change. Not all people who want to make change feel that they fit into movement culture. Players here are seeking identity (as opposed to seeking power or material resources). They behave much as they would if they were waging a political fight, but they avoid the idea of politics.

## CHAPTER ONE: Literature review and methodology

*People are like, women play rugby? Yeah. And they do a lot of other things too. Guess, what, open your mind, it's not just about this one thing. Which is good . . . for them to be surprised. Women play rugby, maybe they do other stuff that I hadn't thought about.*

*(retired Ravens rugby player)*

*I think it [playing rugby] opens people's eyes up that a woman can be just as physical as a man and still go home and put on her heels and lipstick and be a woman. And I think it carries over into the workforce, yes. We can put on our lab coats and be a scientist, or be a physician, or be a nurse, or be a clerk, or do whatever.* *(Tornadoes rugby player)*

*It took years of watching my daughters develop strong, agile, competent bodies before I began to recognize that something new was happening: a further stage in the emancipation of women was under way . . . Female strength, courage, and competitiveness are providing women a new way to live in the world. We are shedding timidity and learning to stand up for ourselves. We are accomplishing a new way of feeling secure that's rooted in our own agility, timing, and physical strength. And that is going to create social change.*

*(Colette Dowling, The Frailty Myth)*

The women who made these three statements certainly understand themselves to be part of a dynamic, exciting time. They seem to be describing something that fits Tarrow's definition of a social movement: "a collective challenge, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities" (1998:4). The movement for women's sports is comprised of individuals acting collectively through an existing structure in order to build new structures and new identities. Its development has been structured by the same kinds of political opportunities and constraints that other movements have been built around. This movement certainly creates new opportunities for individuals. It has involved a repertoire of contention that has included traditional feminist forms of protest. It creates a shared set of goals, a shared culture, and a shared identity for many, although it is important to note that not all female athletes think of themselves as feminists or find solidarity with other female athletes specifically on the basis of gender. In short, this type of dissent is worth including in our scholarly exploration of social movements.

But we haven't included it. Social movement scholars, notably those in the political process theory (PPT) tradition, have taken the public protest event as their object of analysis.[1] This has been useful in building a store of empirical evidence for the theory, since public events are the easiest ones to quantify. We can measure the duration of a strike or count the members of a union. And indeed publicity has become a core component of many modern movements. But a focus on protest events and other public challenges cannot tell the whole story.

1 For influential examples see Tilly 2004, Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, Snow et al. 1986, and McAdam 1982.

Far from being a simple matter of neglect, this scholarly oversight is deeply rooted in the gendered organization of our society: the public sphere has traditionally been inhabited by men and defined by masculine behavior, while women have operated primarily in the private sphere. This means that in studying public events we have tended to study the behavior of men. As women increasingly take part in public life we can expect their actions and motivations to become more visible in social movement scholarship. In the meantime, however, defining contentious politics exclusively through the public protest event leads to a systematic omission of women's political contributions.

My approach is deeply influenced by feminist theory. The first feminist assumption I follow is the institutional model of gender. Rather than seeing gender as a simple variable, I see it as a social institution and a large-scale organizing principle. A social institution is essentially a set of expectations (norms and laws) arranged around a central value. It is the interface between individual agency and social structure: individuals come together to create an institution, and the institution shapes tastes, desires, perspectives, and behaviors of individuals. This process continues in a cyclical manner, with the dependence between agency and structure resulting in a crystallization of the institution's values over time. Contemporary sociologists of gender commonly use Risman's 3-level model of gender, which tracks the ways that gender is constructed (1) through individual identity construction, (2) through continued interaction between gendered individuals, and (3) through macro social structures such as legal and economic systems. I adopt this model, and I also adopt West/Zimmerman's oft-cited understanding of gender performance as an interactional-level accomplishment. I'll discuss both of these

in more detail in Chapter Four.

The second major feminist influence on this project is the feminist critique of the separative self model of the individual (England 1993; England and Kilbourne 1990; Benhabib 1992, 1987; Keller 1986;). What is the separative self? It is the conception of individualism upon which the spirit of Western Enlightenment thought rests. It's the idea, built into traditional economic theory and liberal democracy, that each individual has discrete and pre-existing tastes, desires, and motivations. Although this idea may seem self-evident, it is not the only way to think of an individual: it's also possible to imagine a self that comes to decisions about his/her own tastes, desires, and motivations only through interaction with other individuals. This is a feminist issue because women's lives have traditionally taken place inside tight family networks and women have depended on others for their economic survival. Women have not traditionally been welcome in public spaces; their voices have not traditionally been welcome in public discourse. This pattern has blurred the distinction between personal and private.

Within the field of sociology, the separative self model has received attention as one of the fundamental assumptions of rational choice theory (Friedman and Diem 1993; Folbre 1993; England and Kilbourne 1990). However, its importance goes beyond rational choice theory into neoliberal economics and the Western post-Enlightenment understanding of individuality itself, and it thus underpins many of our major social institutions — like personal property (Nedelsky 1990), representative democracy, and the liberal social contract (Benhabib 1987). The concept rests on an assumption that there are two dichotomous and distinct types of selves: separative and soluble (Keller 1986). The

first is understood to be autonomous, agentic, and rational — and valuable. The second is understood to be its opposite: dependent on others, supportive, and emotional. If these constellations of character traits sound familiar to most Americans, it's because they are consistent with traditional masculinity and femininity.

However, it's not sufficient to remove the separative self from our institutions and substitute its opposite. A truly effective feminist critique of the separative self does not simply valorize the soluble self (England 2003); it points out that the distinction between the separative self and the soluble self is an illusion and a problem. Once we establish the artificiality of this dichotomy, we call into question the public sphere/private sphere distinction as well. The critique of the separative self model goes hand in hand with critiques of the public sphere/private sphere distinction, most clearly articulated by Benhabib.

My project zeroes in on this part of the argument. PPT assumes a clear, predictable divide between public and private. Its definition of politics depends on that divide. I contend that definition of politics should be broadened. Tilly and Tarrow (2007) differentiate contention (claimsmaking), collective action (coordination), and politics (interaction with the state). Where these three spheres converge, they explain, contentious politics result. Adding a strong organizational structure to contentious politics creates a social movement, something that is both sustained and public. In this project I challenge political process theorists to re-think the concept of politics, as many feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were able to do. Rethinking politics requires us to adjust the other two criteria in this model: claimsmaking and contention. Extending these categories to

include forms appropriate outside the state-centered arena will make it clear that social movements do not only occur in public spaces through formalized performances. Sustained protest – that is, sustained and deliberate dissent, intended to lead to social change – can take place inside relationships and in everyday interactions as forcefully and effectively as it can take place in the streets.

## 1.1 Theoretical literature review: social movement theory

### Redefining politics

This project is based in the political process perspective on social movements (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Rather than viewing social movements as mob activity, political process scholars understand them as rational processes. They describe a movement participant as a rational actor who makes a thoughtful, reasoned choice to join. Since there is a high cost associated with transgressive behavior, a movement participant must perceive potential benefits that outweigh that cost. Political process theorists contend that movement elites make careful decisions about tactics and timing that will bring success to their particular movements (Della Porta and Diani 2009; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tarrow 1998; McAdam 1982). I share these fundamental assumptions, but my project challenges the way political process theorists have understood and used the concept of politics.

As I mentioned in the previous subsection, the separative self is the name given to the Enlightenment idea that each person carries a clear and relatively consistent set of tastes, desires, and motivations. Essentially, this model of the individual has come to

dominate Western social, political, and economic institutions. Thus it is not a surprise that PPT, a subfield that takes a sociological approach to understanding formal political change, also relies on the separative self model.

Pointed culturalist critiques of PPT (Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Polletta 1999) have characterized PPT as overly structuralist. This critique challenges PPT to bring the focus back to the individual and draws attention to the interconnectedness of identities. This isn't a deliberate criticism of the separatist self, but it does work toward the same goals by moving social movement theory away from the rational choice models with which it was originally loosely aligned. Some explicitly feminist social movement scholars have joined in the call for an increased attention to culture, identity, and emotion (Taylor and Rupp 2002; Ferree and Merrill 2000). Others have used social movement frameworks to explore gendered processes inside particular movements (Fonow 1998; Irons 1998). They have looked specifically at women's movements (Rupp and Taylor 1987), but also at the central role that gender plays in other social movements. Feminist scholars have begun to discuss the ways that gender shapes movement organizations, frames, collective identities, goals, and outcomes (Ferree and Hess 2000).

As I explained above, Tilly and Tarrow (2007) emphasize that political process theory is designed specifically to address movements against the state. Yet social movement scholarship is broadening to include cultural movements as well as those movements that specifically challenge the state (Snow 2004; Van Dyke et al. 2004; Zald 2000). In many cases, the distinction between state-centered movements and cultural

movements is simple to identify. However, this distinction is not always clear. Formal claims against the state have been crucial to the American movement for women's access to sports, for example. The issue of Title IX legislation and enforcement has comprised a major rallying point for political action. Yet the efforts and discourse developed in support of Title IX take the same shape as prior claims made against the Amateur Athletic Union and other non-state authorities. And at the core of this public conflict is the set of private, everyday relationships and social understandings that comprise gender. The civil rights movements and the current movement for same-sex marriage similarly stretch the boundaries of that which we call "political".

**Three feminist challenges**

Some scholars have used PPT and related approaches to trace formal women's movements. These have been fruitful, but employing PPT to study the trajectories of feminist efforts is not quite the same thing as critiquing the theory itself. The three feminist challenges that most directly influence my work are (1) Katzenstein's studies of protest from within formal institutions; (2) Mansbridge and Flaster's study of "everyday activism", or protest influenced by but separate from formal movement organizations; and (3) Rupp and Taylor's recent work on the contentious potential of drag performance, which mirrors my own research on women's rugby.

***Protest from within institutions***

Social movement scholarship has begun to recognize instances of protest conducted outside of the usual formal avenues. Katzenstein (1998), for instance, directs

attention toward non-elite forms of contention, introducing the prospect of protest inside institutions. This type of protest, while not entirely private, happens in a much less public space than the usual march or boycott. The movements Katzenstein examines (feminist movements in the church and the military) call for the inclusion of women into institutional strongholds of traditional male power. Katzenstein expands the definition of contention to bring it off the streets, but her focus is contention inside institutions. So the protest she describes is quite organized. Unlike my athletes, her actors engage in quite formal contention. They've formed explicit movement organizations with no other purpose than to support the transgression of boundaries.

What's notable about Katzenstein's line of research is that her actors feel themselves to be part of the establishment they wish to challenge. This is important for two reasons. First, it's important in social movement literature because political process theory assumes establishment and challengers to be quite distinct parties. Again, gender is more complex than this since it intersects individuals' fundamental relationships and identities. One of the biggest difficulties political women's movements have encountered in the past comes from this complexity. In order to create collective identity, an "us vs them" divide must be made; yet marking that divide across gender boundaries in a simplistic way would mean dividing loyalties clearly within families and communities. As any historian of lesbian separatism will tell you, that project hasn't been successful over time. A traditional PPT account of women's movements reinforces an overly simplistic "battle of the sexes" approach to gender.

The second reason I draw attention here to Katzenstein's spotlight on individuals

who are both challengers and part of the establishment is that it reminds us to understand gender as an institution, broad-reaching as it may be. Once we understand gender to be a social institution, we can see that the institutions of the military and the Catholic church have quite a bit in common with the gender system. It's this institutional quality that creates cross-cutting personal identities and makes it difficult for many women to feel comfortable naming themselves as a political entity; yet understanding this institutional quality (that is to say, understanding that structural inequality is quite separate from individual experience, and understanding that all participants are responsible parties) may in fact hold the promise of change.

***Everyday activism***

Mansbridge (2007, with Flaster) goes a step further. She expands political process theory to include the concept of the "everyday activist", a person who brings the force of a movement into her everyday interactions. Mansbridge draws our attention to the person "who both acts in her own life to redress injustice (or to advance a policy, broadly speaking) and takes this action in the direction and context of a social movement" (3). She interviews 50 women who are uninvolved with formal political organizations and traces their self-reported use of the phrase "male chauvinist" in the context of their own private lives. She reasons that the use of this phrase signals a collective political identity even though it occurs in a private setting and involves people who do not ordinarily see themselves as activists. In using it, a woman places her own life in a larger political context, calls for change, and invokes the support of others like

her. Mansbridge emphasizes the high degree of agency involved in the everyday activist's behavior, pointing out that the everyday activist is not simply parroting movement elites. She is a rational actor who negotiates political opportunities and threats (11).

Even the very phrase "everyday activism" questions the clear distinction between public and private spheres. Mansbridge and Flaster also bring attention to the fact that protest does not have to be the only motivation behind an action in order for the action to be contentious. This fact is widely acknowledged in social movement literature (Polletta 2006; Goodwin and Jasper 2004; McAdam 1982); yet proof of participants' intent continues to be used as criteria for the legitimacy of a social movement. It may be that movement participants are supposed to be driven only by selfless feeling of duty to the collective good at the time of the protest, while the benefits of participation are measured after the fact. Mansbridge and Flaster show us that shared interest and individual interest are not mutually exclusive. An individual can be self-interested and act collectively at the same time, and her self-interest does not taint her contribution to the collective good. Neither does it relegate her to "free-rider" status. Of course it is possible to see this as an extension of the separative self critique: the everyday activist is neither wholly separative nor wholly soluble.

One more key point made by Mansbridge and Flaster is that everyday activists are less likely than organized activists (which I will call formal activists) to share an oppositional consciousness. Though everyday activists may perceive the world as generally unfair and strive to make it fairer, they are less likely to think of major institutional actors as part of a coherent system that protects its own interests (632). This

point will become important in my own analysis, as I'll discuss in Chapter Four. It is an important contribution to the literature because, again, it complicates the overly simplistic assumption that personal and political can be cleanly distinguished.

***Contentious potential of performance***

The existing study that perhaps comes closest to my work is Rupp and Taylor's 2003 study of drag shows in Key West. They show that performance can be a viable form of social protest. As we saw above, protest does not have to be the only motivation behind an action in order for the action to be contentious. The drag queens Rupp and Taylor study have both personal and collective reasons to perform. Rupp and Taylor use the critieria of (1) contestation (that is to say, subversion of dominant cultural institutions), (2) intentionality, and (3) collective identity to evaluate the contentious potential of drag (217). In this sense, women's rugby can function in much the same way. For many women, athletic performance is a direct demonstration of an actor's commitment to social change. It is a claim made on behalf of a movement, and at the same time made in the context of everyday interactions. There is a substantial public, performative element to rugby.[2]

If the drag queens Rupp and Taylor interviewed perform gender transgression through appearance, the rugby players I interviewed perform gender transgression through rejecting appearance in favor of agency.

2 As a form of leisure rugby is part of the private sphere, but spectators, staged competition, and costumes also make it more public than it might appear. I discuss this further in Chapter Five.

## 1.2 Topical literature review: women and sports

### The transformative potential of women's sports

Women's sports are an ideal setting in which to study non-formal "everyday" protest. To begin with, sports are an important means of creating and implementing gender norms. Sociological studies of masculinities have often included analyses of the role sports play in boys' personal development (Kimmel and Messner 2004; Messner and Sabo 1990). Yet women's relationships with sports remain under-theorized. Athletics is an especially important site for the study of gender management, identity negotiation, and structure-agency questions. It is a site where gendered bodies and identities are constructed, and where women's access to their own physical power is restricted. This study contributes to the explanatory value of political process theory while also bringing attention to the important part that proponents of women's sports currently play in the redistribution of power across gender lines.

The work on gender, sports, and power is interdisciplinary. It is not typically located in the subfield of sport sociology but rather is pulled from feminist research in psychology, kinesiology, history, and sexuality studies. For example, Twin, Cayleff, Shockley, Cahn, and Festle are all historians — yet their accounts of women in sports are both sociological and political. All of these authors assume that sports can be a vehicle for women's personal and systemic power.

The three feminist themes in this substantive literature that set the stage for my own project are (1) the need to treat access to one's own physical body as a contestable resource; (2) evidence of organized, formal movements for gender equality in sports; and

(3) a call to use women's experience of sports to interrupt the institutional strength of the gender system.

***Access to the body***

Access to one's own body is commonly framed as a valuable resource – a resource worth staking a political claim on – in both scholarly and popular writing. For example, Brace-Govan (2004) uses interview data with female weightlifters to suggest that access to physical strength is both personally and politically empowering to women. The implication behind this work is that a successful struggle for increased personal empowerment will translate into systemic change. Hall's essay "Feminine to feminism" (2002) makes this point explicitly. Theberge's studies of women's hockey (2000, 1997, 1987) also highlight the transformative potential of women's movement into sports, particularly contact sports. Influential publications also include Hargreaves' critical work on sports and power (2007, 1985), Heywood and Dworkin's essays on media representations of female athletes (2003), and Festle's history of women's early struggles (1996) to be recognized in collegiate sports.

Notably, a large body of non-academic edited volumes showcase the individual stories of female athletes' experiences of personal empowerment through physical competition (Samuel 2011; Sandoz and Winans 1999; Heywood 1998; Roxxie 1998; Fox Rogers 1995). These anthologies are generally bookended with prefaces and conclusions that frame the individual stories as part of an oppositional collective identity on the verge of exploding into structural change; this collective frame often appears in the individual accounts as well as the editors' notes. While not scholarly, the publication of this work

hints at the existence of self-conscious movement actors. Similarly, the emergence of advocacy organizations such as the Women's Sports Foundation (whose website[3] offers directives like "Title IX: Know the Basics", "Equality and You", and "Sport Belongs to Us All" as well as a highly organized trove of peer-reviewed research publications regarding the benefits of women's access to sports), paired with dedicated academic research centers like the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women In Sport, alert us to the presence of an emergent social movement — or at least a group of individuals who think of themselves as movement actors.

***An organized movement for gender equality in sports***

Although recreational athletics might seem far from the usual state-centered purview of social movement research, women's sports have been the focus of a well-defined social movement in recent years. According to Della Porta and Diani's 2009 reader, a social movement consists of (1) formal interaction networks; (2) shared beliefs and solidarity; (3) collective action focusing on conflicts; and (4) the use of protest. All of these elements are present in the contemporary movement for women's sports. This is an area in which we have already seen formal protest: petitions for women's athletic equality are available on the NOW and Feminist Majority websites, as well as at the nonprofit site savetitleix.com. This movement is based in existing networks but also creates and strengthens new ones. And its development has rested on the construction of frames and the contestation of meaning. Professional tennis and soccer players have boycotted major events and gone on strike for wage parity (Festle 229). I contend that in this political

3 http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org

context the simple presence of a woman in a team contact sport is often an act of protest; however, we do not need to work hard to find examples of formal challenges and movement language treating women's sports as a social movement claim (see Hargreaves 1998).

***Interrupting gendered institutions***

As I explained in the theoretical literature review, a social institution is a complex set of expectations organized around a set of core values. Over time, those values are protected and reproduced by the normative functions of the institution. The core values in this case are a certain kind of gender inequality derived from two supposedly opposite gender identities. Scholars who take this view treat conventional athletics as a key component of this larger gender system. They see women's increased access to physical power as a means to interrupting this institution (and thereby interrupting the reproduction of gender inequality). Dowling, for example, takes this approach: in her book *The Frailty Myth* (2000) she explores the ways that gendered expectations become etched onto feminine bodies. She claims that our physical bodies are subject to the same type of social construction that our gender identities are. Treating girls' bodies and boys' bodies as different from an early age, argues Dowling, produces two physically different types of bodies suited for two different types of movement.

Messner (2002), Burton Nelson (1995), and Bryson (1987) all show how a rejection of feminine elements is a major tenet of masculine sports culture. Grasmuck's ethnography of Little League baseball (2005) makes the same point. Dunning (1994) and Pfister both echo this sentiment in their work on rugby and soccer, respectively: Pfister

writes that "sport is especially vital as a resource in shaping male identity in times in which the balance of power between the sexes is undergoing change" (2002:73).

A great deal has been written about heterosexuality and exclusion in women's sports. Cahn and Lenskyi have each contributed reverent histories of lesbian women in sports. Wright and Clarke (1999) found that displays of heterosexual behavior were rewarded with increased media coverage. Ezzell describes interactions between players as hetero-fit. Festle's work on the feminine apologetic (1996) tracks one strategy female athletes and adminstrators have taken in order to avoid threatening the heteronormative center of traditional sports (thereby protecting their opportunity to participate). Similarly, Cleary (2000) looks at the apparent gender contradictions that come from New Zealand women's participation in rugby; Fallon/Jome (2007), Gill (2007), and Ezzell (2009) take for granted similar apparent contradictions in American women's rugby and examine the ways individual players manage those contractions through interactions with one another.

## 1.3 Methodology

### Research field

In this project I examine private, informal forms of feminist dissent through qualitative research with female athletes. My research field is competitive adult women's rugby. For many female athletes, sport is an instance of collective action. To be sure, many others shy away from strong feminist ideology and prefer to see their fight as determination to establish their own individual opportunities. Still others participate in organized sport without a conscious focus on social implications. I do not assume that all

female rugby players take the same approach. However, the social meanings women's rugby carries and the oppositional culture that surrounds it both place the sport squarely in the middle of protest. In this project I look at individual rugby players, discovering how their efforts differ from, build on, and contribute to more formal social movement activity; I also look at the culture of this sport, discovering how it fits into the broader context of social and political change.

I have chosen to focus on contact sports precisely because they are gender-atypical for women. In fact, contact sports are considered so controversial that they are specifically excluded from Title IX enforcement policy (Fields 2005).[4] Women's involvement in rugby, football, ice hockey, boxing, and the martial arts has been growing, but it is still widely considered nonconformist behavior. If we understand gender as an accomplishment, following West and Zimmerman (1987), we can see that female contact-sport athletes are constantly required to justify their breach of gender norms to the people around them (as well as to themselves). This makes their choice to participate more salient to their identities, and it raises the likelihood that they have considered how their actions relate to their broader social context. Additionally, studying a team sport rather than an individual sport allows me to watch collective identities develop. I expect that shared motivations, feminist or otherwise, will be particularly prevalent and particularly visible in a team setting, since the players are involved in constant interactions with fellow athletes.

This project consists of semi-structured interviews with 47 current and former

4 For more, see Title IX Legal Manual, US Dept. of Justice, Section 415(b)(3), and more importantly Code of Federal Regulations 34 (Sec. 106.41, Athletics). Both are available at http://www.justice.gov/.

players drawn from 9 selected USA Rugby Football Union women's adult club teams, supplemented with participant observation. Rugby in particular is a logical choice for the main study because I already have considerable access to the culture. As a former member of a nationally-ranked women's rugby club, I come to the research with a prior understanding of the norms, expectations, motivations, and organization of that population.

**Method: Semi-structured interviewing and direct observation**

The nine teams represented in my sample are the nine teams that appeared in the national USA Rugby championship tournament most consistently over the prior 10 years. These teams are all based in major cities across the United States. Although women's rugby is a fast-growing sport in the United States, individual clubs still operate at the grassroots level, and so local teams regularly appear and disappear over a short period of time. A top-ranked, tenured team is more likely to have a strong and consistent institutional culture. Along the same lines, an established team is more likely to have a clearly documented history. This history further reinforces institutional culture and also provides me with an avenue to contact potential subjects who have retired from the game.

Semi-structured interviewing, in which subjects use their own words to describe their own experiences, is ideal for studying the particular ways that movement participants understand and relate to frames, collective identities, and movement goals. Semi-structured interviews can capture the precise meanings that these instances of everyday activism hold for athletes. Semi-structured interviewing also allows me to extend the feminist premise of this project to its structure as well as its content. Archival

research and event analysis, the mainstays of social movement research, often represent the interests of socially privileged actors. Taylor stresses that feminist scholarship ought to legitimate the voices of actors who have previously been excluded. To this end, it should work to break down the traditional researcher/subject power structure and it should involve making women active participants in telling their own stories (1998). This works because (1) when women use their own words, the data provide a more accurate account of their experience, and (2) when women are involved in the process of telling their stories, they can help direct the inquiry, suggest new questions and avenues of research that matter to them.

I take an iterative, theory-building approach to this research. In doing so, I follow the "extended case method" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2002; Burawoy 1998). I do not intend for my sample to represent all female athletes, or even all feminist athletes. Nor do I expect the primary value of my study to lie in giving voice to this population. Through repeated waves of observation, theory construction, further observation, and theory re-construction, I use the data generated from this small sample to evaluate and improve the theoretical framework.

**Data collection**

The interviews were spread out over a two-year period. They were all done in person, although earlier pilot interviews were conducted both in person and over the phone. I made nine separate trips to meet with players in six cities. The only team whose home city I didn't visit was the Ravens – I interviewed those players in the Scorpions'

city after they finished playing a series of away games. However, I didn't always interview the other players in their hometowns. For example, when I traveled to the national Sweet Sixteen tournament I spoke with players from the host city but also caught up with players from visiting teams.

In most cases I suggested that we meet at a cafe or restaurant that would be convenient for the participant. Asking participants to suggest meeting locations in their own neighborhoods meant that I traveled widely across geographical, class, and social boundaries (from Oakland to Palo Alto to San Francisco's Mission district, for example, and from a tract home in sprawling Falls Church, VA to a Capitol Hill brownstone to DC's crowded tourist-oriented Eastern Market). More than half the sample was interviewed in their rugby gear (often muddy), either at the side of the field or at the bar where both teams gathered to socialize directly after competing. Another 25 percent invited me to their homes for the interview. About 20 percent suggested restaurants in their own neighborhoods. A few also arranged for meetings in conference rooms at their workplaces. I audio-recorded all interviews and transcribed them later. This worked well for interviews set in participants' homes; it was trickier to transcribe the interviews that were done outside in inclement weather. I used a combination of processing methods for the data: hand-coding and also Atlas.ti qualitative data software.

I conducted observations on the same trips during which I scheduled interviews. This meant that I attended games, heard coaches giving pep talks, watched spectators enjoying the action, and observed players socializing together after games. I also attended a gala anniversary dinner for the Comets and helped to coach college women's rugby

practices for a season. I also drew upon my own experience training and competing with one of the teams in my sample. I was an active player for the Comets from 1994-2002. This experience affected my interpretation of the behaviors I observed, and it also provided me with access to the women's rugby community.

**Interview guide**

In early stages of the project I understood my central research question to be "what is the relationship between women's rugby and feminism?" After conducting a small pilot study I began to see that it would be very difficult to define feminism in a way that would ring true for most of my participants and yet remain specific enough to use analytically. The research question became "what is the relationship between women's rugby and social change?" I told participants that I wanted to ask them about their relationship with the game. When they asked for more detail, I postponed my answers until after the interviews and then spoke relatively freely with them about my research.

The questions I asked (included in full in the appendix) can be summarized as follows:

> ***conversational warm-up:*** *How long have you played? How did you get involved?*
>
> ***personal identity:*** *When you meet new people, do you tell them about rugby? What new information do they have about you once they find out that you play rugby? What are rugby players like?*

***collective identity:*** *Would you encourage other women to play rugby? Little girls? Is there something different about women who play this sport?*

***oppositional identity:*** *Do you think most girls have sufficient access to sports? Why do you think it's taken so long for women to begin playing contact sports? Have you met people who don't like the fact that women play rugby?*

***involvement in formal politics:*** *Have you ever been to any marches or protests? If so, for what causes? Do you belong to any women's organizations or networks?*

***commitment to the formalized movement for women's sports:*** *What does Title IX mean to you? Who do you think is currently doing the most for women's sports?*

I also asked players about their personal relationships with feminism and about the possibility of gender equality in the future. Inevitably, either these last questions were dropped right away ("don't know"; "probably not") or they brought on a stream of passionate, relaxed conversation. In the second scenario, I added a last question about whether playing rugby could contribute to large-scale social change.

Once I put the question about feminism aside, I did find that these questions guided the data toward the research question. Players easily moved from to talking about rugby to talking about their impressions of systemic gender inequality.

**Researcher's stance**

Elite women's rugby is a small community. On interview trips I frequently encountered players who I'd known while I was playing. These connections were extremely helpful. Some players who had been standouts during my rugby years (roughly 5-10 years before the interview stage of this project) were now coaching or managing elite teams. This certainly helped me gain access. At the Sweet Sixteen tournament I felt very lucky to have a history in this small community: I locked the keys to my rental car in the trunk just hours before my flight left town, and I didn't own a cell phone. Serendipitously, one of the championship tournament's referees was an old teammate. I borrowed her cell phone, called a tow truck, and made it to the airport in time. I recount this story because it captures the tone of this community and my place in it as a researcher. Players understood that I was now partly an outsider, but they quickly looked to make the conversational connections that would transform my status.

Even where I didn't have the benefit of a personal introduction, though, players were generally enthusiastic about being interviewed. They seemed genuinely pleased to be asked about their personal relationship with this game. Many had been graduate students themselves, or were looking forward to that experience in the near future. Only a small handful of participants, three at most, seemed openly distrustful of higher education and/or research in general; but even these players seemed to treat the prospect of discussing rugby with a writer (me) as an opportunity to create positive publicity for the sport.

## CHAPTER TWO: Rugby and rugby players

### 2.1 What is rugby?

**At the field**

It's early on a Saturday morning, 7:30 a.m. The city park is empty and it's still cold. Three women dressed in jeans and warm-up jackets are pulling lengths of PVC piping out of a pickup truck. Next to them two other women are bending over a stack of wooden posts, untangling a length of jute rope. Few rugby teams have their own dedicated practice and game spaces. League regulations require that the home team install two sets of upright posts, similar to football goal posts. The field must be lined with white paint or chalk. Corner flags and ropes must be placed along the side of the field. Thus this city field, used for flag football and ultimate Frisbee and kids' soccer games during the rest of the week, is transformed into a rugby pitch.

The three players who were busy with the PVC pipes now drag the equipment to one end of the field, where they lay it out on the grass and begin to attach the pieces to form a giant H-shaped structure. Meanwhile, someone else is using a post-hole digger (essentially two long-handled shovels fastened to each other by a hinge assembly) to dig two craters in the grass. When this is finished, the group will carefully lift the giant assembly, place the ends of the pipe in the holes, and fill in the holes, stamping on the dirt to make sure the pipes are secure. While all this is going on, yet another player is pacing out the boundaries of the field with a tape measure. A teammate pushes a small cart behind her – as the cart moves over the grass, it leaves a crisp white line of chalk behind it. The pitch is beginning to appear.

At 8:15 the rest of the team starts to arrive. They bring children, dogs, and coffee in styrofoam take-out cups. The visiting team arrived at the airport last night and they have been scattered in twos and threes around the city staying at the homes of home team players. This morning players from both teams arrive in mixed-up groups and sort themselves back into two clumps by the side of the field. Players greet each other and sit down in the grass to kick off their sweatpants and street shoes. A few minutes later, the two clumps have distinguished themselves by color. One group wears matching blue socks and shorts while the other wears maroon. Metal-cleated black leather shoes have also been added. The two clumps take off in opposite directions.

The blue clump breaks into a jog and the players fall into step together. One player produces a ball and passes it with a short toss to the player directly behind her. As the runners move forward, the ball makes its way backward. When the last person in line receives the ball, she increases her stride and races to the front of the line. The ball cycles back again. The clump makes its way around the entire field and without saying anything the players break off into a circle. There is some chatting at this point, but no discussion about the task at hand. Everyone already knows what to do. They stretch together and then line up to wait for the coach to call instructions for sprints.

The referee (usually but not always a man) comes by at some point during this process and the team stops what it is doing to line up for a cleat check. For a moment they look like a dance line, with their arms draped over each others' shoulders for balance and their left knees bent so that the ref can see the soles of their shoes. He walks down the back of the line, making sure that all the players are wearing proper rugby footwear,

with no sharp edges on their aluminum cleats. He also glances at players' fingernails, again looking for sharp edges, and examines any knee or wrist braces to make sure there are no hard metal pieces inside. Each team resumes warm-ups, splitting into position groups for drills and then coming back together to run a few lines before the kick-off.

**Rules of the game**

The object of a rugby game is to carry the ball to the opposite edge of the field as many times as possible. There are two main obstacles: the other team, and the fact that the ball may not be thrown forward. Since a rugby ball is long and gently pointed, designed to bounce unpredictably, kicking it down the field is not a sure bet. If one player breaks away to run the ball down the field alone she will likely be tackled to the ground. The best option is to travel in a group. One player sprints forward, then evades her defender by passing the ball backward to a teammate, who is running just slightly behind her. The new ballholder then sprints forward, passing backward again to another teammate running just slightly behind her. Under these rules, it's simply not possible to move the ball very far alone.

Other important rules: the ball carrier – and only the ball carrier – may be tackled to the ground. If the ball is knocked out of bounds, players form two lines perpendicular to the sideline and the ball is thrown back onto the field through the tunnel between them. It is legal for some of the players in those lines to be lifted high into the air in order to improve their chances of catching the ball as it comes back into play. And periodically during regular play, when the ball changes hands, about half the players on each team

form something called a scrum. This functions similarly to a jump ball in basketball or a dropped puck in hockey. The ball is dropped on the ground midway between the two teams, leaving them to struggle for possession.

Few other organized sports require as much physical contact or require contact to be as controlled as is the case in rugby. To unfamiliar spectators, the activity on the field may look chaotic. It is in fact highly organized. Every player has a different job, and the sequences being played out on the field now have been rehearsed countless times. Unlike American football, rugby is a continuous game with no easy breaks or timeouts apart from halftime. A game is made up of two 40-minutes halves with ten minutes in between. Players are responsible for making their own decisions, then, for 40 minutes at a time. Once the game begins, coaches can call out suggestions, but they are not really in control. Substitutions may only be made at halftime or in case of injury. There isn't much of a chance for rest during a half.

Each team has fifteen players on the field at all times: eight forwards and seven backs. The forwards are mainly responsible for using physical strength to press the ball forward, block their opponents, or fight for possession. They tend to be slow-moving and solid. Whenever possible, they travel as a group. Informally they are called “the pack.” Forwards spend much of their playing time caught up in scrums, lineouts, and rucks – all physically demanding formations used to moving bodies forward against the resistance of other bodies. By contrast, the backs use speed and agility to advance the ball. They wait behind the scene for the forwards to produce the ball, then they burst through holes in the opposing line to score. Backs' movements can be crisper and faster than forwards'

movements, since backs usually only make contact with others' bodies when they are tackling or being tackled. They spend much of their time looking for opportunities to slip through the other team's formation or to confront opposing players one-on-one.

Players are divided into first- and second-string teams, called A- and B-sides. The sides often overlap. If the team is big it may also field a C-side. Anyone not playing in the A-side game still warms up with the team, because the A-side needs someone to practice against. The forwards in particular need someone to scrum down against – they would literally fall flat if they tried to rehearse a scrum formation without an opponent. The A-side needs someone to ruck and maul against, someone who will challenge them and get them ready for real competition, someone who will give them a full-body muscular warm-up and get them into gear mentally. A training machine similar to an American football tackle sled has been invented for this purpose, but it's considered better preparation to work against real people.

This makes committing to the entire day's events into a real act of love for B-side and C-side players. In a typical Saturday schedule, warm-ups might start at 8:15 for a 10:30 A-side game. (Fields volunteers would be there earlier.) The B-side game might start around noon at the earliest, and if there's a C-side game it might start around 1:30. If it isn't enough that B-side players are getting up early and giving up their day, sitting outside getting sunburned and often fasting if they haven't thought to bring portable food, they are also getting pushed around and bruised and tackled by bigger, faster, more serious players on their own team. If the weather is bad, it's even more of a sacrifice, since warming up requires stripping down to shorts and splashing around in the cold

mud. It's very difficult to get dry and warm again after that. And it's out of the question to arrive later in the day. If a player can't make it to warm-ups or to the A-side game, she won't be on the roster at all that day. Likewise, it would be unacceptable for an A-side player to leave after the first game. The whole team is there for the whole day.

Immediately following the game, an intensive show of muscle and competition, all parties retreat to a pub to socialize together. The home team's social chair makes the rounds after the last game seeing that everyone has directions to the party. No one goes home to shower first, unless the weather has been unusually bad and arrangements have been made for the visiting team to come back to home players' houses to get cleaned up too. Usually, everyone goes straight to the pub and anyone who stops to change first is derided. Dinner is served at the party – it is either bar food or a potluck organized by the home team. Beer is flowing.

The sport's British roots lend an air of mystery to its American players. It has its own language. There are no uniforms, shoes, or fields; instead there is a *kit*, a pair of *boots*, and a *pitch*. *Ruck*, *scrummage, lineout*, even the word *rugby*, have a British feel to them. American ruggers know that this sport that seems so out of place in their own culture has a proper following in far-off places like New Zealand and Australia, places they've never seen but now suddenly feel connected to. And the sport carries a civilized masculinity. Popular slogans seen on t-shirts and bumper stickers include "elegant violence" and a version of Nietzche's famous line,"whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." The genteel mood is somewhat Victorian, even faintly colonial.

**History of the game**

Like cricket, rugby is vaguely associated in the minds of Americans with young boys at Eton wearing Harry Potter blazers or with nineteenth-century white men surrounded by dark natives, sitting in the shade in a hot climate. These images have some basis in fact, since the game was invented by well-to-do British schoolboys. The school it is named after, the Rugby School, has a 450-year tradition of educating middle-class boys.[5] Football became a popular diversion among British public school boys in the early Victorian years, and over time each school developed its own version of the game. The modern game of soccer was developing at the same time as rugby, from the same roots. As mentioned above, rugby was named for the school where it was invented; it is still often capitalized (Rugby football) or referred to as "rugger", after a linguistic pattern known as the "Oxford -er". This suffix pattern also gives soccer (formerly "association football") its current American name. When school teams competed with one another it was customary for the home institution to set the rules of the game. Folklore attributes the invention of rugby to one particular Rugby School student, William Webb Ellis; although this story seems to be a myth, it continues to circulate (Collins 2009). The Rugby version of football gradually gained in popularity until it became known as a game of its own, eventually spreading through European colonialism to locations such as Australia, New Zealand, and Cōte d'Ivoire (Llewellyn 1995).

Collins attributes the eventual dominance of the Rugby School football code to a popular 1857 novel, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Collins describes the novel as part of a

5 The Rugby School has been coeducational since 1993. See the Rugby School's website at rugbyschool.net.

"crusade" to imbue upwardly-mobile middle-class boys with a moral framework and a feeling of responsibility to oversee their social world, a philosophy termed "muscular Christianity" that was prevalent in the English public schools beginning in the 1850s. The establishment of rugby football, the Young Men's Christian Association, and the Boy Scouts all sprung from this philosophy, which posited the purposeful cultivation of both physical and moral health (character) as the proper way to form young gentlemen. This idea was closely linked with a confidence in the British class system and an emphasis on the leadership of educated white men (MacAloon 2008). Tom Brown's Schooldays was a moralistic Horatio Algerish novel that illustrated the experience of one boy's public school experience (Hughes 1858). From *Tom Brown's Schooldays*: "The least of the muscular Christians has hold of the old chivalrous and Christian belief, that a man's body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth which God has given to the children of men."[6] Boys all over England and beyond were encouraged to emulate the hero, Tom Brown – and since he attended the Rugby School, that school's version of the football code stuck.[7]

Of course this history is only one small part of the modern sport. It would not be fair to call rugby a simple relic of a past class system. As the game has been adapted to new cultural contexts it has come to hold new meanings. For example, as Welsh ruggers became as good or better than English ruggers, the game became a symbol of Welsh

6 For more on this movement see Putney 2001, Vance 1985, and Hall 1994.

7 Putney (2001) suggests that a version of muscular Christianity still exists in the American Catholic and Protestant traditions. He mentions Notre Dame, the Promise Keepers, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

nationalism (Howe 2003). The same is true for other post-colonial countries, including South Africa and New Zealand, which have developed some of the strongest rugby teams to date. Rugby, like any other cultural symbol, takes on different meanings in different historical and social contexts. The sport has evolved into two distinct variations, rugby union (similar to the game played at Rugby School) and rugby league (similar to Irish football). Almost all rugby clubs in the United States play rugby union. Rugby sevens, a version involving fewer players and speedier games, is slated for inclusion in the 2016 Olympics.[8]

The modern version of the sport is still imbued with chivalric rituals. Players shake hands before and after each match. There is a long tradition of amateurism, rooted in the idea that money spoils sportsmanship.[9] The chivalric culture, combined with the relative obscurity of the sport in the US and the counter-intuitiveness of the rules, can make rugby seem like a secret society. It makes it easy to imagine a "no girls allowed" sign tacked to the clubhouse door. But women's rugby has become extremely popular extremely quickly in the US. The first teams were set up in the early 1970s at midwestern universities (two teams in Colorado and one in Illinois).[10] Colleges and universities have continued to be a major center for American rugby. Most of the women who play first encounter the sport at college. At the same time, though, the sport is unusually accessible, since few women learn to play it as children. There is no expectation that an adult knows

8 Announced on http://www.olympic.org/ October 9, 2009. "Golf and Rugby Join 2016 Programme."

9 See http://www.usatoday.com/sports/2009-06-29-us-rugby-cover_N.htm. This has changed for rugby in most European countries now, and men's elite rugby in the US has very recently become semi-professionalized, meaning that they are not salaried but do receive a per diem travel stipend. US women's rugby remains unpaid.

10 See US Women's Rugby Foundation website at http://www.uswrf.org/

the rules when she shows up to practice for the first time.

In the US, a constellation of women's teams formed in the mid-1970s. Many of these first teams still exist today – as I mentioned in Chapter One, eight of the nine teams in my sample are over 30 years old. All rugby in this country is governed by one organization, USA Rugby. USA Rugby divides teams into three main groups – men's, women's, and youth – and then each of those groups is divided further. For women, there are college, club (adult), and select sides. College and club are each broken down into ranked divisions, much like NCAA sports. This study focuses on players from 89 women's Division I club teams. Many of these athletes also play select side. This means that they have been invited to represent their teams and regions at all-star development camps and in international competition. USA Rugby's top team, the group of players that represents the US in international test matches, is called the Eagles. They began competing in 1987 and took first place at the inaugural Women's World Cup in 1990.

## 2.2 Who plays this game?

In the following section I introduce four players from my overall sample of 47. Each of these four players is typical in some way, but as you will see, their skill levels, ages, personalities, and life stories are quite different. Here we have Lailah, a talented young player hoping for a promising future with the national team; Jenna, a kindergarten teacher who plays rugby recreationally in a small Midwestern city; Terry, who recently retired from the game after a long and accomplished athletic career; and Meg, an Ivy League-educated urban mom. These four short biographies are followed by a broader discussion of the overall sample. At the end of the chapter, I include a description of the

entire sample.

## Four players

### *Lailah*

Lailah arranged to meet me at a Starbucks in a strip mall. She showed up wearing flip-flops and oversized sunglasses. Lailah is 23. She got an early start to rugby, beginning her first year of high school. She readily admits that it was clear right away that she was going to be really good at it. She remembers, “I wasn't really afraid of anything. I was like, I'm bigger, and I'm kind of faster. They'd have to catch me to hit me. And then they'd actually have to hit me pretty hard to make me fall. So in that case, I don't really have anything to worry about. So I spent my first four years thinking that rugby was the easiest game on the face of the planet . . . it was just that easy.” It's striking how comfortable Lailah is describing her physical strengths. (Or perhaps the striking thing is how her comments remind us that women don't normally express confidence so directly.) She's not overconfident, though, she's just recounting her experience. Once she moved on to college rugby, she encountered real competition and started to find real challenge and intensity in the game. Lailah was invited to regional camps and all-star tournaments, and managed to place herself in the sights of the national women's coaches. After college, when she began to play with the Blaze, she moved into an entirely new category and began to learn from seasoned vets, some of them superstars. Her season was interrupted by a common knee injury, and right now she's training to return to the field. If the injury heals properly, making the Eagle squad is a real possibility for Lailah. She has already represented the US on the U19 and U23 division teams. Her dream is to make the

Eagle squad by the next World Cup.

Lailah calls rugby the central focus of her life. She's talented and fit. She loves the sport, and knows that she has a chance to rise in the ranks if she works hard right now. She says that no one gets to know her for more than five minutes without hearing about rugby. Her non-rugby friends introduce her to new people as the rugby player, and her circle of rugby friends keeps getting wider and stronger. She can't even begin to imagine her life without rugby in it: she started to play in the ninth grade and hasn't been away from the game since. Her goals for the future revolve around rugby. So does her social life. Even when she's injured and taking time off for physical therapy, she's still thoroughly immersed in this world. Since so many of her late-adolescent and early-adult developmental steps were taken in the context of rugby, it's hard even to ask who she would be if she hadn't started playing.

Lailah graduated from a beach-town high school where she felt the range of normality to be extremely narrowly constructed. She estimates that 80 percent of the girls she went to high school with were size four blondes. Lailah is biracial and, although she's not a very large person, she's not tiny either. She doesn't think she was ever a size four – she went straight from kids' sizes to being a size seven. She was uncomfortable with her size. Once she got to college, that changed. The shift can't be attributed to her going to a diverse university, because she didn't. Her university was a particularly white and conventional rural place. But even though the university was “by no means a melting pot” Lailah did start seeing more different people than she ever had before. She saw athletic women, curvy women, curly-haired women, brunette women. The ideal female

body was no longer tiny and blonde. And she found a place in a multiculturalism-centered sorority. There, she was able to relax and to express herself a little more. Lailah says that she earned a reputation early on for being “frou-frou”. She would show up to team socials wearing bright colors, wearing makeup, standing out. She found herself receiving lots of attention from guys for the first time. She equated attention with attractiveness, and stopped worrying about her body.

Her statements carry a far-reaching and youthful energy: everyone should play rugby, everyone should play sports, this is the best thing on the planet. She's bubbling over with enthusiasm. She enthuses that rugby has given her so much, that is has helped her so much to grow, and that she would love to be able to share that gift with other people. In conversation she uses her sorority sisters as a point of reference. She has strong convictions, but they are backed up by a thoughtful nature. Her confident comments are tempered by charming acknowledgments of more accomplished players or of the complexities of real life. Lailah likes to go out. She likes to dress and feel feminine on those occasions, and she admits that sometimes she perceives a very concrete power in her successfully feminine appearance. She says that sheepishly, adding that she knows that whatever benefits she gains in the moment are offset by greater social negative effects of her behavior. But in the moment, when she is dressed up and feeling pretty, she will nevertheless insist that men buy her drinks. She describes cajoling a bouncer: “Why should I have to pay the cover charge? I got dressed up. I'm a girl. I don't pay cover charges.”

At the moment, Lailah works as an assistant in a third-grade classroom. She also

has a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant and she is a volunteer coach for a high school rugby team. Lailah hopes that someday she'll be able to be a stay-at-home mom, once she's done other things first. In the meantime, rugby is her priority. “I can't tell you how many times I get the question, 'what do you want to do with your life?' I want to play rugby. 'No, but really, what do you want to do?' No, that's what I want to do.”

***Jenna***

Jenna is from a small Midwestern town. She graduated from college just a few years ago and moved to a small city a few hours from home. This is her first experience living on her own and she is clearly in the process of forging her own identity. Jenna did not play rugby in college. She has played for 2 years on this city team. As she puts it, “new job, new sport, all fun.”

She got involved in the sport through a friend of a friend, the only person she knew in this new city. Her teammates quickly became her entire local social network. Jenna was a high school athlete, and she describes a big social difference between the two experiences. In high school she showed up to play but didn’t have strong social connections with her teammates. Now her teammates are her friends, a situation she loves. As her social circle in this city expands, though, she tries to separate rugby from the rest of her life. She goes so far as to try not to mention rugby to people she meets, but then gives in and tells them anyway. One reason she tries to separate her social spheres has to do with identity – she says that she sometimes worries that men she’s dating will be interested in the game and decide that they want to play, too. Jenna feels that would

encroach on her space. “No, you’re not allowed to try it, because it’s my thing.” She also seems to be looking for balance. She expressly says that she wants to make sure she can have conversations about non-rugby topics as well, especially since she knows her rugby career will someday end.

Jenna certainly seems to come from a traditional family in a traditional town. She seems to be at the point of moving away from a small town into a place where she meets different kinds of people. A lot of her comments are aimed at letting her family and hometown friends know that the world is bigger than they think. She obviously feels a lot of pressure to conform, and her comments run back and forth about whether she wants to conform or not. She makes some bold statements that separate her from her roots, but then makes other statements that confirm her connection to those roots. The most dramatic example is this comment about self-reliance:

> *My hero is my aunt, who was the only one in my family that didn’t get married by 24. Which now I am too! . . . I want to prove that you don’t have to get married to do stuff. I want to prove that I can buy a new car on my own, and I did it without my dad. And I want to prove that I can get my own 401-K and when I do get married, some guy will be like, man, you did yourself really good! And I’m like, I know, I’m loaded, what can I say? And I do it on my own.*

Jenna came of age after Title IX, a fact she mentions when she says that she

always had access to sports growing up. She specifically says that she's thankful for Title IX, because there was nothing else to do in her small town besides sports. It is interesting that she expresses so much frustration with rigid gender roles but says that she's always had a chance to play sports. Jenna likes it when people assume that since she plays this sport she must be "tough", but she isn't sure that she deserves it.

Jenna explains that if her mother had gotten her way, her daughter would literally have been a beauty queen. Jenna was on the pageant track, in fact, through her dance company. She is glad that she took the athletic track instead because she believes that she gained a more reliable kind of confidence through sports. She calls the pageant confidence "a false confidence." Jenna does not seem to break away from the world of appearing, though. She values her ability to live in both worlds. Jenna takes pride in having held typically masculine jobs – working around heavy machinery and trucks – and yet she is a kindergarten teacher. She says that "If I was just a beauty queen, then that's all I would be." She would be a feminine woman no matter what. As an athlete, she has access to the world of action too. Jenna describes the experience of getting muddy and bruised in a game, then showering, getting dressed up with earrings and a feminine hairstyle, going out, and making a favorable impression with men. Jenna's anger and frustration come out against barriers she sees to being able to exist in both worlds – and that includes barriers that trap her in the rugby world. She hates it when people assume that she is a lesbian, for example, as much as she hates it when they assume that she is weak and feminine.

***Meg***

Meg is the director of operations for a major HIV/AIDS outreach organization in a large East Coast city. Her husband, Jay, is a community organizer and stay-at-home dad. Meg graduated from an elite New England university with a powerhouse sports program, and that's where she was introduced to rugby. She stayed involved in the sport from the beginning of college until her mid-thirties. At that point, Meg quit her job and didn't have health insurance. She did play without health insurance in her early twenties, but didn't feel comfortable making that choice in her mid-thirties. Now almost 40, she has taken a new job and gotten new insurance, but she hasn't returned to rugby. She says she's often wondered why she didn't go back.

Meg and Jay have settled in a racially mixed, class-diverse city neighborhood. They recently celebrated the birth of their first daughter. Meg is conscious of her class privileges. She and Jay are committed to working on social issues – the war in Iraq, women's reproductive rights, affordable housing, poverty, social justice, "to building community in our community, to bringing people together." At her suggestion, we met for the interview in the café of a local natural grocery co-op. During our conversation she casually cited a New York Times political editorial, discussed theories of communication styles, and mentioned studies she'd seen connecting sports with women's well-being. She is obviously thoughtful about discrimination and its effects, and she takes seriously her responsibilities as a beneficiary of power systems.

Meg played a lot of sports growing up. She grew up in a community in which "everyone" (girls and boys) played soccer. In soccer, she was frequently ejected from

games because she was a very physical player. Rugby was a good fit because she could focus on the game without worrying about containing her forcefulness. She played rugby all though college, then moved to her current city specifically because of rugby – she met another player at a wedding who encouraged her to come and join the team. Meg was in a period of transition and it seemed like a good enough reason to choose this city. Now, five years after her retirement from the game, many of her closest friends are still former Comets teammates.

However, Meg's relationship with rugby has been conflicted at times. She describes herself as never completely "drinking the koolaid." She means that she has remained somewhat skeptical of the team's intense identity and drive for excellence. Meg's team does have a reputation for excellence. The team was founded in the mid-seventies and it has maintained a consistently strong record since the first women's championship tournament. It continues to produce new national-level players every season. The team is widely looked up to, even in years when it does not take first place at nationals. At the same time, the team (like some other top teams) has a reputation for standoffishness and self-aggrandizing. This is the "koolaid" that Meg says she avoids. Meg does strive for excellence. She is a smart, determined person, sometimes fiercely so. She is a solid player. Over the years she has been a team officer and a field captain. Meg has never really been on the Eagle track, however. And she has frequently taken seasons off or put other commitments ahead of winning. She loves to win! But she obviously has never been comfortable allowing this team to become the primary focus of her life. It's not clear what's been the sticking point for Meg – the idea that athletic excellence could

be the only real indicator of self-worth, or the idea that team identity could outstrip individual identity. Either way, rugby and this team have still been very important to her.

Meg describes herself as aggressive, saying that she tends to hold people accountable for their actions in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Jay, by contrast, is a "people-pleaser". She says that she in some senses acts more traditionally masculine while Jay acts more feminine. However, she puts forth a fairly feminine appearance, leaving her almost-unruly curly hair long and wearing women's professional clothing. Her style is crunchy, urban, and athletic, but female-identified. Although she does regular volunteer work for a national pro-choice reproductive rights organization, Meg doesn't always relate strongly to other women. While Jay is enthusiastic about joining local moms' groups, she says that she herself can't stand the other moms. "They make me crazy with all their worrying."

Meg says that her closest friends in high school were guys and that she doesn't relate to "overly feminine" women. "My parents were pretty good at convincing me that I could do whatever I wanted." She says that she's never really felt comfortable with women in her age group, except for the women she's met through rugby and other sports. She describes these women as "more real, more true". Also, her rugby friends have tended to reach milestones like marriage and kids much later. Meg says she couldn't relate to high school and college friends who were doing those things before she was. Meg now finds herself part of a circle of former rugby teammates who are now moms. They get together routinely for play dates. There is still something real or true for her about this group of women. Meg likes the idea of her daughter playing rugby someday.

Her daughter is barely walking, but some of her friends' kids who are older are already playing youth touch rugby, an idea that she supports wholeheartedly. She would like to go and watch games on the weekends, like her former teammate friends do, but finds herself completely booked with volunteer commitments – commitments to her neighborhood association, the community garden, and other forms of what she calls "social action."

***Terry***

Terry met me at her home in a gentrified section of a major coastal city. She greeted me warmly outside and led me through the garage and the kitchen, which was punctuated with bright paint and plastic kids' dishes, into the backyard. The relaxed hillside garden behind the house was thoroughly landscaped, with terraced flowerbeds and a deck. I got the impression that Terry and her partner probably did all the construction and planting themselves. Terry is wearing a t-shirt, shorts, and hiking sandals. She laughs easily and talks a lot.

Terry has a reason to be confident and relaxed in this interview. Her name is well-known and well-respected in the rugby community. She has recently retired after 20 years of high-level involvement in the sport. At the height of her playing career, she was named Most Valuable Player in a national championship game. During her years with the Blaze, the team took a string of national championship trophies. She quit playing when she and her partner had a baby, but continued to referee seriously for six years. She stopped refereeing this year at age 40. It's clear that she doesn't have her new retired persona entirely scripted yet. She admits that even though she is technically not involved in the sport right now, she still finds herself checking Facebook for updates on her team's

status and photos of their games, and she is still active in organizing social events like her team's anniversary banquet. It remains important to Terry that others know her as a serious athlete. "It's not just this thing that you show up and do. It's serious stuff." She mentions the level of play of her club several times. Terry is proud of the effort, intensity, and results she and her team have been able to achieve. The first year she played with the Blaze happened to be the first year they won the national title, and she says she doesn't know whether she'd have been involved for so long if she hadn't started to play with that particular team at that particular moment. The challenge and the potential for achievement in her reach have been intoxicating.

During her refereeing career, Terry was one of only a few high-level rugby referees. She explains that she "got competitive" with reffing. It took a lot of work – training, fitness, study of the laws of the game, workshops and clinics, observation, advancing through levels to get higher credentials. She describes her frustration at some aspects of the male-dominated reffing realm, from the common use of the masculine pronoun in clinics and workshops (even though most of the male referees will ref women's games as well as men's games) to the "borderline sexual harassment" she's experienced at pubs and tournament parties. She says she has had to choose her battles, first working hard to be the best possible ref and then using her standing to press the most important points for change.

Despite the seriousness of her long and impressive rugby career, Terry was originally drawn to the game for social reasons. She was an out lesbian in college in the 1980s and joined rugby looking for a gay community. (Jokingly, she says she wanted to

meet girls.) She was already an athlete – she had played softball and basketball since she was nine – and immediately knew she was in the right place. Terry rolls her eyes thinking back to the "Reagan years", when she entered college after thirteen years of Catholic school. She remembers that sexuality wasn't openly talked about at that time. There were a lot of gay men at the university in the late eighties, but few out lesbians. She describes feeling a pressure to create some positive visibility for lesbians at her university. She remembers feeling disappointed: why should people suffer for being gay, when she didn't feel that it was something to be ashamed of? So she joined the campus LGBT organization and later the rugby team, looking for people like herself. She describes her internal pressure to be out as "a kind of calling". She remembers being part of a panel debate about sexuality, and being energized by the idea that she could be part of making this large and important social change happen. She moved to the coast immediately after graduation, knowing that she would find other lesbians there, and she knew that rugby would be a good place to start making those connections.

It worked. Terry has seen the rugby friendships she's made over the years develop into a densely layered social network. The ties she started through rugby have turned into work and community relationships. "A trust, a bond that you get from sweating together, bleeding together, winning and losing together." She says she knows that if she ever needed money, for example, she could ask her teammates. At the same time she has seen her primary relationships tighten around rugby. She describes putting the game first when she was dating. Her partner, who has been her partner for fifteen years now, is not a rugby player but did sometimes travel with the team when Terry was

still playing. Terry says in retrospect that she doesn't know what she would have done if her partner hadn't quickly turned out to be an enthusiastic fan of the game. The sport has affected the choices she's made about friends, family, and career. She muses that she's certain she would have gotten a graduate degree if she hadn't stayed involved in the game. She chose instead to invest her time and effort into one place. She has seen rugby friends do the same while other non-athlete friends have gone back to school.

Terry is an educator. She started as a high school teacher and now is an academic mentor. She is quick to credit her success in the workplace to her experience playing rugby and other sports. She learned to rely on others – in her words, to "lay myself on the line to make sure my teammates were protected." She sees sports as a site for developing discipline, competition, and clarity of values. She says it teaches you how to work with others, how to deal with adversity, how to win, and how to lose. Team sports, Terry continues, help you to realize that life is not always fair. For girls in particular, team sports build self esteem and confidence as well as body image and good physical health. She points out that, apart from dance or cheerleading, girls don't get many opportunities to engage with their own bodies; sports insulate girls against eating disorders and bad body image. Terry observed this last year, when she coached a local high school team. She describes watching one girl change visibly during the course of her first season on the team. She says that the difference in the way she carried herself between early fall and spring was notable. Rugby gave the girl more confidence, a way to classify herself, and "something to sink into." Terry also sees this when she plays rec basketball. She plays on an old girls' rec basketball team – everyone is 35 or above – and is blown away by the

younger players they compete against. She is impressed by their skill level, but also by their drive. Terry attributes the difference to the fact that these younger players have had opportunities to play sports over their entire life, and she sees this as a great thing for women.

**The entire sample**

In addition to Jenna, Meg, Terry, and Lailah, 43 other women shared their rugby stories with me. These women all express a strong interest in being known as rugby players. This is one reason they volunteered to be interviewed for the project. Yet most of them can't define exactly what a rugby player is like. She is “anyone”, they say, emphasizing the diversity and accepting culture of the sport. There are certainly some traits that get mentioned repeatedly: aggression, confidence, intelligence. But no one I interviewed had a concrete way to describe a typical player. And still, with one or two exceptions, each of these women is adamant that she is a rugby player first and everything else second. What do they have in common?

The first thing I notice in interviews is that these women don't mind taking up space. Outside of this context, it is really unusual to sit across from a woman who is sitting up confidently, allowing her knees to uncross and her elbows to relax outward, letting her body occupy the full side of a bench. Women often restrict their movements and try not to take up space (Dowling 2000; Duncan 1994). But this context taking up space is the norm. These women are not trying to curtail their movements. Many of them tell me frankly that they are happy with their bodies. They have come to feel that they deserve to take up space. These women are looking for a challenge, or at least they

describe themselves that way.

> *It's really the amazing people that somehow tend to flock to play rugby and I really do personally think that it's because it challenges you in every possible way. Not only the mental and physical, but you're emotionally challenged in rugby, you're spiritually challenged. You're challenged on and off the field and not only identifying who you are but if you can accept everyone else for who they are. (Sam)*

They are not afraid to try something new. They find it energizing to stretch themselves. And these are extremely competitive people. Given that the players in my sample are all drawn from the highest-ranked club teams in the US, this makes sense. They like to win. And they hate to lose. Level of play is the only notation in these tables (apart from pseudonyms) that I assigned to players. "International competition" indicates that the player is now playing or has in the past played for the Eagles. "Elite" indicates that a player is not an Eagle but has competed regularly at the national tournament.

**Table 1: Levels of play**

| **Level of Play** | **Respondents** |
|---|---|
| Recreational | 12 |
| Serious amateur | 7 |
| Elite | 11 |
| International competition | 17 |
| Total sample | 47 |

They are all college graduates. They're used to focusing their efforts, excelling in a system. Many of them are high achievers outside of rugby, although others have made career sacrifices for the game. And they are disproportionately white. My sample only includes one Latina player and one African-American player.

Despite the fact that they are extremely homogeneous with respect to education and race, many players do emphasize the "diversity" of rugby. In some cases they are using diverse as a code word for queer. The word "queer" is used to encompass non-straight expression and behavior. It includes gender-variant descriptors such as transgender, butch, and androgynous as well as sexuality descriptors such as bisexual, gay and lesbian. But there are actually a number of variables along which rugby brings together people who don't usually come together. Status inside the hierarchical rugby world does depend partly on history and institutional knowledge, but it also depends on athletic ability. This disrupts external social structures that might otherwise be recreated inside a team. Players are reshuffled. They find themselves training and socializing with people younger and older than the people in their other peer groups.

The first of these variables is age. Players are increasingly recruited early – in some cases, before college gradation, through clinics and tournaments hosted by the adult club teams. And many of them stick with the team for many years, even transitioning into support roles (coach, referee, booster) upon retirement. Yet women can and do walk onto the field for the frst time in their thirties. Rugby is remarkable for its capacity to mix women of various ages together into the same social group. The second variable is socioeconomic status. Although all of the players in my sample are college graduates,

there is a difference between graduating from an Ivy League school and graduating from a local commuter branch of the state university. The women I spoke to did both. Since rugby attracts people from a range of SES levels and then rearranges them according to athletic ability and other criteria, there is an unusual degree of social class mixing. The third variable is geography. Most of these teams practice in urban centers. (This is partly because I am sampling high-performing teams, which by necessity form in locations with large feeder populations of athletes.) People move to these urban centers from all over the country. Also, even within these cities, players travel extensively to practice with their particular teams. So one team may draw players from the city, the suburbs, and more rural areas outside of the metro area. Players sometimes even commute from surrounding states. Thus a suburban mom, a downtown hipster, and an uptown attorney can find themselves sharing a tournament hotel room.

Rugby doesn't require a lot of expensive equipment, but travel expenses are substantial. Since teams tend to be geographically distant, it's customary to make long car trips to games and tournaments. This is particularly true for top club teams, who typically make frequent airplane trips during the season in order to get sufficient competition. Because there is a sharp drop-off in playing level between the top few club teams and the many recreational club teams, team captains prepare for nationals by scheduling games against the toughest competition they can find in the preceding season. Airfare, lodging, and meals are all financed by the players themselves. Some players come to the sport with the resources to pay for these trips easily. They belong to wealthy families or they are successful in business. Many others work hourly jobs that don't pay much but do offer

flexibility. My sample includes an office temp, an airline baggage handler, and waitresses. These players work extra hours to be able to pay for their rugby expenses, and they have a sense that they are trading career stability for the opportunity to participate fully in this sport.

**Table 2: Player occupations**

| **Occupational field** | **Number of players** |
|---|---|
| Education | |
| Primary and secondary teachers and educational consultants | 11 |
| Graduate students | 5 |
| Undergraduate students | 1 |
| Finance and law | |
| Financial advisors, consultants | 7 |
| Lawyers, legal assistants | 3 |
| Health and fitness | |
| Physical therapist, massage therapist | 2 |
| Rugby coaches (non-volunteer) | 2 |
| Commercial fitness industry employees | 2 |
| Independent contracting | |
| Writer, consultant, small business owner | 4 |
| Information technology | |
| Support, programming, and tech sales | 4 |
| Wage labor | |
| Office temp, waitress, airline baggage handler | 3 |
| Nonprofit | |
| Human services administrators | 2 |
| Political lobbyist | 1 |
| Unemployed | 1 |
| Unknown | 4 |
| Total sample | 47 |

What else do they have in common? They tend to enjoy the opportunity for intense social interaction. Over and over, the women I interviewed told me that they

played for the camaraderie. The word “camaraderie” does not not seem to come up often in a team setting, where players are more involved in accomplishing their goals than in finding words to express their common emotional experience. But in interviews it comes up again and again. Players describe going anywhere in the world and finding instant friends when they find another rugby player. They place a great value on casual social interaction.

They are comfortable talking about their sexuality, or at least about their gender identities. Nearly everyone in my sample came out (as lesbian, as bisexual, or as straight) without being asked. And they have found rugby to be an accepting space for sexual diversity. Women’s sports have sometimes been a safe space for some lesbians (Cahn 1994; Lenskji 1987). Presumably those who don't feel accepted in any given leisure group end up leaving – but the proportion of interviewees who bring up the accepting nature of rugby is still striking. Some of the women who mention this were the ones who needed acceptance. By bringing it up, they communicate how powerfully they needed an accepting space and how much they have appreciated finding it. Others learned to be accepting through exposure to rugby. These players mention acceptance because rugby challenged them to be more accepting, first of varying gender identities and sexualities and later of other differences. Or they mention it because they are frustrated with the general rigidity of their social world, even if they themselves don't feel that they are victimized by it, and appreciate finding an alternative space.

**Table 3: Sexual identities disclosed**

| Sexual identity | Number of players who volunteered this information |
|---|---|
| LGBT | 22 |
| Straight | 10 |
| Not disclosed | 15 |
| Total sample | 47 |

I did ask players for their ages and professions, but I did not ask for information about their sexualities. Sexuality is only noted for players who volunteered information about their sexual orientation during the interview. While some players identified themselves through categories, such as lesbian or straight, others chose instead to disclose details about partners' genders. Thus, the notation “LGBT”, which stands for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender, is used here to indicate any information deliberately provided about non-straight identity or non-straight choice of partners. The notation “straight” is used to indicate any information that I interpreted to be given purposely by a player intending to set herself apart from non-straight identity or choice of partners.

**Table 4: Players' age ranges**

| Age range | Number of players |
|---|---|
| 18-29 (post-Title IX) | 17 |
| 30-39 (early Title IX) | 16 |
| 40 and over (pre-Title IX) | 14 |
| Total sample | 47 |

Two distinct socio-historical groups appear in my study. The first group came of

age before or contemporaneously with Title IX. The women in this group graduated from high school and college in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. (Although the law was technically enacted in 1972, its effects have materialized slowly over the course of many years.) The second group came of age after Title IX. These women were born in the 1980s and typically had access to strong role models in women's sports, often in their own families. By the time they began elementary school, Title IX enforcement was under way. In addition to having formalized access to sports and other educational opportunities formalized, this later generation also grew up with co-ed gym classes (Wachs 2003). Of course there are many attitudes and perspectives available to women in sports, not all of them transgressive. Athletics can sometimes be transformative, and it can at other times be another channel for the proverbial male gaze (Heywood and Dworkin 2003). And large-scale social changes, even when driven by policy, take hold inconsistently as they interact with class, geography, culture, and local politics. The dividing line between the pre-Title IX and post-Title IX groups is of course age, but urban vs. rural locale and family culture also determine which group an athlete is in. In any case we can assume that all of my subjects fit into one of these categories, straddle them comfortably, or struggle with them. They are located in a transitional historical context.

## CHAPTER THREE: Rugby identities

Now we know what rugby is and we know what some of the women who play it are like. In this chapter I ask: what does rugby mean to those who devote themselves to it? To rugby players, what is rugby about?

When I ask this question, I'm really asking for two things. First, I'm looking for a description of the kind of person each of these women feels rugby makes her into. I'm asking how rugby contributes to individual identity. Second, I'm looking for a description of rugby culture. In other words, I'm looking for indicators of the system of shared meanings that structure perception and behavior in the rugby universe. What identities, value systems, and social relationships are available in this context?

In this chapter I discuss three themes that emerged in players' explanations of what rugby "is": commitment, community, and individual agency.

### 3.1 Rugby as commitment

When players answered this question directly, they overwhelmingly talked about commitment. They all seemed proud to be known as committed individuals, and they also seemed to derive a real enjoyment from the experience of being wholly committed to a project. Players discussed several different aspects of commitment, which I explore here.

#### Commitment as sacrifice

Most tangibly, a player's commitment can be measured in the sacrifice she makes to play the game. The athletes I interviewed give up impressive amounts of time and money. They endure a lack of support and sometimes open criticism from family, friends,

and strangers.

> *My parents never went to any of my rugby games. They just weren't interested. Even in high school, my mother would say, 'well, I don't like sports, I'm not going to come and watch you play soccer.' That was devastating to me. Rugby was no different . . . it wasn't like, 'Rugby is important to you, so I will feign interest' – which I will do for my son constantly now as a result. (Melinda)*

> *There was this South African man I met in London who was definitely drunk as I was walking to the tube at like 6am going to a game. He was clearly still out from the night before. He saw me carrying my rugby bag . . . he said, 'Rugby bag? You don't play rugby!' I was like, [firmly] 'Yes, I do.' He was like, 'No, you don't! Women don't play rugby.' And I was like, 'Yes, we do. You have a national women's team in South Africa. You might not know it, but you do.' And he was just like, 'No, that's ridiculous. I've never heard of that.' (Roxanne)*

These players see commitment as a clear choice. And they realize they are giving up other experiences in order to allow rugby to take center stage in their lives.

*It has directed my life for the last pretty much eight years. It's taken precedence over geography, career and all that jazz . . . there definitely hasn't been a lot of balance in my life since I started playing rugby. (Tracy)*

Several players described deliberately choosing jobs that would allow flexibility around tournaments and practices. Many others described choosing their geographical locations around rugby opportunities. This wasn't only true for national-level players like Alison and Kendra. Recreational players reported making the same choices. As we saw in Chapter Two, Lois feels sure that she would have gone back to school and gotten a graduate degree if she hadn't been playing rugby.

Meg and Melinda reflect that their rugby friends settled into careers and families later than their peers did. Jodi echoes this observation:

*And then just the commitment level – it's hard for some people. Most of the people I know who play rugby don't have a family, don't have children. Either it's not something that they want, or they're putting it off until later. So it's kind of like the career path. It's almost like there's a rugby path that you go down.*

**Commitment as passion**

Commitment can also be interpreted as an identification with teammates and

team, something I will discuss in more detail in the next section. Brooke explains that she has stopped trying to date women who do not play rugby, for the simple reason that outsiders are often uncomfortable with her deep investment in her team:

> *One of the first things is, I think we understand time commitment. And we don't question, I'm going away for a weekend and I'm going to be in a room full of other women and we're all going to be showering together and getting muddy together and there's no question of, what are you doing. It's oh, yeah, that's rugby.*

Almost all of the players I spoke to explained commitment as a kind of passion. It is worth remembering that all of the women in my sample both chose to play on one of these high-achieving teams and chose to be interviewed, so we can expect them to voice positive feelings about rugby. Still, the depth of passion evident in their description is remarkable.

> *Rugby is the main thing in my life and probably will be for the next few years. I don't think anyone knows me and doesn't know I'm a rugby player. It's all over my facebook pictures, it takes up my nights and weekends. My friends and my girlfriend – everything comes from rugby. It's kind of impossible to meet me and not hear about rugby. (Roxanne)*

Commitment is also measured by the drive required to achieve excellence in the sport. These players want to win, they want to achieve the particular kind of physical body that will help them to win, and they want to keep improving their skills over a career or a lifetime.

> *I think to play for the Blaze we must have something in common. I think it is a tenacity. Whether you're a roster player or not, what you are is tenacious. Because you came out and you stuck it out and you lived through it and you want to win. You wouldn't be on the team if you didn't want to play the best rugby that you can play and win. Goal number one.*
>
> *(Lailah)*

> *It attracts people who are able to go into something a hundred percent. I think that what attracts cool women [to rugby] is that they can give a hundred percent to something. The sport of rugby is a hundred percent or nothing. (Robyn)*

> *I like that it's extreme competition. You go all out . . . I actually had a one-to-one [job] interview where someone was like, you play rugby? That means you're dedicated. And I was like, yeah! That's a good thing. Yeah. I am. (L.D.)*

The most concrete expression of both sacrifice and passion I heard from a player was from a player who chose a rugby tournament over her own college graduation ceremony. College graduation is a major rite of passage, typically encompassing two major institutions (education and family). Roxanne, someone who mentioned the importance of both education and family many times during our interview, skipped her graduation day in favor of a regional tournament where she knew selectors for the national club team would be present. In fact, because of an injury, she wasn't even able to play at the tournament, but she still chose to make an appearance.

> *I'd broken my leg . . . and I sent them [the Eagles selectors] tapes of myself playing and they seemed interested. I knew that they needed to see me in person and see that I wasn't broken. I was 8 weeks out of a broken leg, I was still supposed to be wearing a walking cast, but I refused to wear it because I needed them to see me in person and know that I was capable. And then I made the team . . . It's all way worth it. It's still something my mom is trying to deal with – that I will pick rugby over anything else in my life. Any day of the week, any night of the week. Rugby decides where I move next in my life. It decides what kind of job I'm going to have, where I'm going to go. I'll never not live in a city that has a good rugby team . . . [laughing] I'm really into rugby. (Roxanne)*

Commitment and competence often seem intertwined in players' minds. In part

this is because athletic excellence requires focus and repetition. Among talented athletes, commitment does lead to competence. And the ostensible object of these players' commitment is of course competence. They want to be the best rugby players they can be. Players used words like focus, intensity, strength, and competitiveness.

> *Being an athlete means I'm competitive, I'm independent, I'm strong, I'm confident. I feel like it's part of my identity. It feeds my self-confidence. Just like I love my job and I feel great about my job. It's really important to me that people know that not only I love my job but I think I'm good at it. And I feel that same way about being a rugby player. It's like a badge of honor. (Melinda)*

> *Recently I just started working at a corporate law firm, as a little grunt person. And I was very clear about what I was as a rugby player because I was going to have to take a lot of time off from work. So I laid that out there in the beginning. And as I started to explain the game to people, looks of horror occasionally crossed their faces, incredulity and that sort of thing. But respect with that. I think that it says that you have a degree of competence, you can't be a total weenie. And a degree of commitment. (Tracy)*

## 3.2 Rugby as individualism *and* collectivism

### Focus on collectivism

Many players emphasized the collectivist side of this culture: the team is everything. Several players told me that rugby was the "ultimate team sport". Indeed, the game itself seems to reinforce their descriptions of connectedness.

There are not many situations in everyday life that require a person to touch (physically) as many people at once as rugby requires. Players work together very, very closely on the field. Take the locks, for example (two of the eight forwards). A lock sets up for the scrum by standing tall, planting her feet solidly, and matching her hips up against the other lock's hips. Both face forward and put one arm around the other's waist, as though they are posing for a photograph. This is a familiar enough image for most American women. But then each lock reaches around her partner's waist and grasps a handful of her jersey and pulls it tight so that the two women can't be easily separated. Maintaining that tight connection along their hips and shoulders, and not letting go of the bind on each other's jersey, the pair kneels. Each lock uses her free arm to reach forward between the legs of the player crouching in front of her. With that free hand she reaches up to grip the front waistband of that player's uniform shorts. Before play has even begun, the physical connection between these players is both strong and unusual. When these women's bodies are connected, none of them can move without the others feeling it and shifting around to re-balance the unit.

This intense physical interdependence contributes to an emotional perspective emphasizing the collective aspect of identity. Yet since every player has a discrete field

position that comes with its own specific responsibilities, there's a strong feeling that each person is different and each person is vital. And once the game starts, each person has made a commitment to being there. She has taken on a share of the responsibility for the team's well-being. The fact that rugby can be dangerous, since it's a quick-moving contact sport, adds to the gravity of that responsibility.

> *[The reason I play is] The intensity of it and being on the field and knowing that other people have your back. You have to work together, you've got somewhere to go. And then being off the field it's the same thing where people have your back. They take care of each other. (Erin)*

> *There's something about going on a field and suffering and being in pain and creating some beautiful things that brings you together more than, like, a knitting club or something like that. No offense to the knitters out there. (Tracy)*

> *I like that it's extreme competition. You go all out. . . it's very technical and you really have to know what you're doing. So you can't just go out there and be like, I'm going to do it alone. Team-oriented, that's cool. I just like that . . . it's like warfare, but it's also like poetry at the same time. (L.D.)*

Off the field the network stays tight. Rugby is a social space structured around distinctive teams. Team affiliation is heightened for the players in my sample, who take great pride in being part of successful, lasting clubs with clear identities. Where smaller teams may form, play for a few years, and then disband, the teams in my sample have built solid institutional histories — and reputations. The Comets and the Chargers are known as cerebral and consistent. The Chargers' crosstown rivals are reputed to be scrappy, the Coyotes and Rockets teams are known as social, and so on. These team reputations are eagerly reinforced through gossip and rumors. Knowledge of other teams' identities helps to cement a player's sense of belonging, and knowledge of her own team's identities provides her with a script to follow.

> *I was very, very lucky to play my entire career with a team for whom rugby was not just a sport. It was a family and it was a responsibility. And it was - you had to hold the team in a great amount of respect. And make a commitment to them that far surpassed any physical commitment. You have a responsibility to your team to do the things that are asked of you and more. You have a responsibility to make sure not just that you have eaten dinner, but that your [tournament hotel] bedmate has eaten dinner, that your [hotel] room has eaten dinner, that somebody who might have gotten knocked in the head earlier today has eaten dinner. You know, you have a responsibility to make life easier for each other, rather than more difficult. You have a responsibility to train*

*just as much if not more than everybody else on the team. You have a responsibility to show up for practice on time, be a leader, get out of your head, get over your bitchiness, get over your crabbiness, get over your pouty mood, get over the ball you just dropped. It's a huge responsibility to 20, 25 other people . . . every single person that wants to get there and has agreed to be a part of this group that's all working to get there has a responsibility to work to the best of their abilities to make sure that all of those things that need to happen, happen. (Becky)*

Becky is an officer in her club and takes service to her team very seriously. Her dedication is not unusual. By now it will be clear that all of the players I spoke with are extremely dedicated athletes. In addition to making time for scheduled practices (usually 2 evenings each week) and weekend games (many of which require substantial travel), they also spend hours each week running, lifting weights, and monitoring their nutrition carefully. But beyond all of this, many players like Becky also choose to serve their teams in an administrative capacity. Each team is a formalized club with executive officers (president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer) and numerous supporting officers (equipment manager, social chair, alumni liaison, fundraising chair, recruitment liaison, and so on). In particular, Becky's feeling of being part of something bigger than herself is echoed by many other players. When she says that "you have a responsibility to your team to do the things that are asked of you and more" she doesn't specify who is asking. Although Becky notes that "every single person" holds this responsibility, the entity

making the demands is clearly more than a collection of individuals. Many other players made similar statements, often using the words “responsibility”, “support”, and “community”.

> *Rugby can build within a person a sense of community. It doesn't just happen. A community doesn't just happen. You have to be an active participant, an active person to give towards the community. A lot of times you'll see alumni and older ruggers that come back and bring food. They'll come and watch and continually support even after they're done playing. Definitely, you learn it when you start playing, you learn it when you're done playing too. (Erin)*

**Focus on individualism**

While they described rugby as the ultimate team sport, players also described a strong investment in self-reliance. Sports by definition entail testing one body against another. They require a focus on personal responsibility. Rugby in particular also carries a sort of counter-culture impulse. It attracts, or at least purports to attract, some people who don’t quite fit into regular society in general and gender normativity in particular. In this sense, rugby's very core involves challenge, agency, and opposition. It requires individualism.

When I asked players to identify traits they respected in other women, many described confidence and self-determination.

*Being outspoken and not afraid to express what you think and what you believe for fear of retribution. And women who will try things . . . women who will come out every week and try their hardest, even if they're not the star of the team. They're working to be better and they're giving it what they can. Women like that, really, I admire. There was this girl who was just a horror show when she came to play for us. I mean, she couldn't last about a half. But she was like, I'm going to get this. She went and she started training for a marathon. She was just doing all these great things. She just came out and she was doing so much better. And I completely admire her, because she got into it and said, you know what? I'm going to be better. I want to be better. And she started running and doing all these things to make herself better. Women who will do that, I just think are amazing. (Casey)*

*I just really admire people that are self-confident and don't care about what other people say and just kind of can do their own thing, regardless of how they're perceived by other people. Women that aren't afraid to be intelligent. Who aren't afraid - you know, that kind of thing. I just find it very admirable. (Angela)*

Individualist themes are also evident in the comments they make about themselves: "I play for myself" (L.D.). "I do what I want" (Tracy). "I like to go out and

do anything and it doesn't matter if, oh, that could be dangerous, you could get hurt" (Tyler). It also comes out in their choice to put rugby before family – a reversal of ideal feminine priorities – and before career – a reversal of ideal middle-class values. I also found a focus on self-reliance in the comments of lesbian players who each described being the only outspoken lesbian in her respective social setting. Terry (whose story we saw in Chapter Two) talked about feeling a "calling" to be one of a very few out lesbians at her university in the 1980s. Similarly, Roxanne talked about her unapologetic response to falling in love with a woman in the midst of a very straight set of teammates, friends, and family.

> *I was so in your face about it. I didn't sit people down and say, [solemn whisper] 'I have something to tell you'. I came back and I said, 'I am absolutely in love with this girl. She is fucking amazing. She is going to be coming up here all the time. Housemates, you better be okay with that. Family, you better be okay with it too.' (Roxanne)*

Roxanne expresses pride in this approach, which she describes as a product of her individualist, confident personality. Individuality, and self-determination are clearly valued by these players.

**An apparent contradiction?**

How can a culture so firmly centered in collective identity also include the strong individualist drive that these women display? Many players cited this particular

combination as a special aspect of rugby. I offer two explanations.

***A learning space***

First, like any part of identity, learning to be part of a team is an ongoing process. Lailah's comments show this clearly. She says she's an individual – something she clearly values about herself – who has had to learn how to be part of a team – something she wouldn't be willing to give up. She describes how rugby has brought the two approaches together for her:

> *By nature I'm more of a self-interested person, kind of 'well, that's what I want to do, so see you guys later.' I was very much into being an individual. Which is cool. But playing on a team kind of taught me how to not be so cocky and ridiculous. There's always somebody that does something better than you. How to be a gracious winner as well as a gracious loser . . . How to push the envelope without being a flagrant cheater. There's nothing wrong with pushing the envelope, but there's boundaries . . . like I said, the team aspect of it. How to accept people for who they are.*

Once she was rooted in the team, though, her learning experience did not stop. She had to figure out how to retain her individuality in the context of a group. She gives this example from her formative college days:

*[I learned] how to walk your own path, because when I was the only one I got a lot of shit for that. A lot of shit for that. Joining my sorority, I cannot tell you how much shit I got when I joined my sorority. But that was something I did for me, not for anybody else. You learn to be comfortable with you who are. People question your motivation from both sides. From the rugby team it was like, why do you feel the need to join a sorority? What's up with that? That takes times away from us. People on the other side were like, why do you play rugby? That's kind of a man's game. Or, don't you know that most girls who play rugby are gay? Or, what does that say about you?*

*But I do this for me, not for you. So why do I care what you think? You learn to feel confident enough in yourself to do the things that aren't necessarily accepted by everybody else . . . And the big thing that I learned is that you can be an all-star without being a showy person. There is respect in this game for getting in there and doing the hard work. Not everybody has to know your name or your [jersey] number for you to have been the most valuable player. And that was a really big lesson for me.*

Other players reported learning similar lessons about teamwork. Tracy has played in many high-stakes international games with some of the most celebrated rugby

players in the world. She described coming to understand more about communication on a team:

> *I've learned that people think differently, people communicate very differently. And that's something that's extremely important to know about your teammates and yourself on the field. And just to be able to embrace that while you're communicating differently doesn't mean that they're communicating poorly. And so to find a middle ground, connect with people. I think I've learned that, to communicate better with people on their terms.*

Before taking up rugby, L.D. had played "pretty much every sport out there"– basketball, field hockey, volleyball, and soccer. She had been a snowboarder and a swimmer. L.D. says that, playing rugby, she learned to work with her teammates rather than alongside them:

> *One thing it's taught me – I used to get mad a lot. Not a lot, but in terms of people in sports screwing up or whatever. Now I'm like, you know what? You need to pick up your teammates, you need to pick up yourself. And it's really helped me in that way of, like, don't get down, just do better next time.*

According to these players, rugby seems to allow individually-oriented people to learn collective dynamics.

***A community of individualists***

Let's return to the question of how a culture firmly centered in collective identity can also include an unusually strong focus on individualism. The first answer, given in the section above, is that the experience of rugby trains individuals to work collectively. The second answer is that this is a community of individualists. Many of them self-consciously behave in a way that shows that they aren't constrained by social norms.

The fact that it's a niche sport – what Casey calls this "the whole underworld aspect of rugby" – adds to a sense of individualism. The obscure British terminology described in Chapter Two gives the in-group clearer boundaries. A new player does not have to do much in order to join beyond declaring commitment and being ready to demonstrate it, but getting used to the new rules requires an investment of time and work. So joining makes her special. It places her in a new category. "I think, too, to a certain degree, there's also a sense of - not necessarily awe, but - hey, this person's doing something outside of the norm." (Jodi)

On one particular afternoon I interviewed three players together, all in their late 20s. They were close friends – when I arrived for a scheduled one-on-one interview with Amy, I found Jordan and Erin waiting at the kitchen table with her. It might be expected that these three friends would describe their experience in a plural tense. But although they did clearly make this into a group conversation, looking to each other to finish their thoughts and overlapping each other's answers with laughs, individuality and self-reliance

came through in their words and in their attitudes. It was clear to me that they were, like Lailah, individualists in a group.

> *When I started playing in high school, no one else - we were pioneering something, we thought. I came to find out, it's been going on since, like, the seventies [laughter]. But we played college teams because there weren't any other high school teams. So we felt really different. We felt like we were doing something really special. That's still something we feel. Not a lot of people know about rugby, but I think that's kind of the novelty of it. (Amy)*

These women seem to see themselves as different from the general population as individuals, not just as a group set apart. Several subjects identify themselves as freakish or having an aggression problem. Casey called herself "a strange duck". This is a joke, but slightly serious as she explains that she sees herself as an outsider from the general population, and from other women.

Some players, like Angela and Amy in the previous paragraphs, described their individualism with pride. Others spoke of feeling uncomfortable, alone, and socially off until discovering others who belonged to this small tightly-knit enclave of individualism. For some women, rugby is about challenging themselves, pushing to learn about new things and new people. Yet the same women also see it as a safe haven with people who are like them, found after they have constantly and sometimes painfully found themselves

to be outside the mainstream. They recounted experiences of not fitting in elsewhere and of stumbling into rugby only to find themselves suddenly at home.

> *I'm very much a "who" person, and community is really important to me. I think that sports above anything else have been a community and a place to find friends and like-minded people . . . I think that's what sports was for me, finding a community. I always felt that I just wasn't with like-minded people . . . then I went to college and I found girls who were just like me. They would love to sit down and have a massive burrito, a big beer, and then burp and poke fun at the guys walking down the street. I just found similar stronger women and assertive women. Physically we take it to our bodies on the field but we also have that character inside of us. All my best friends are rugby players. (Roxanne)*

### 3.3 Rugby as "being real"

As we saw in the last chapter, Meg reported that she found female rugby players to be "more real, more true" than other women. Almost all the players in the sample made similar comments, although the specific language they used varied. They said that women who played rugby were honest, down-to-earth, and not afraid to be themselves. Is this just a shorthand way for players to indicate affinity? What exactly does it mean to be real in this context?

**Real as authentic**

First, it simply means authentic. I interpreted this to mean that the players who described it this way felt at home; they felt they could be themselves in this community of people like them. These women have found a social space in which they can stop doing the work of presenting themselves to others, stop pretending to be someone else in order to get by. This is significant because it suggests (1) that they're pretending the rest of the time, and (2) that being authentic or honest is a very admirable thing in rugby culture.

The most obvious theoretical frame for this part of the "being real" concept comes from Goffman. These women are making a distinction between frontstage and backstage. This is particularly interesting because of course rugby is performative. It has all the signs: costumes, spectators, script. At a high level of play, it also has directors, reviewers, and publicity. And it could be argued that many of these women are at a particular developmental stage at which they are preoccupied with deliberate construction and presentation of the self. Using Gould's (1978) life transition stage markers, Granskog explains that women in their 20s-30s are involved in defining the self. After their 40s, they are focused on achieving integration (Bolin and Granskog 1993:34). In the earlier case, the front-stage nature of rugby is heightened. As we saw in the commitment section, great value is placed on the "realness" associated with serious effort. It's seen to be each player's responsibility to reach deep inside herself to find her solid, authentic talents and drive.

But as we see in Roxanne's comments about food, great value is also placed on

ease and apparent lack of effort. The value of authenticity in rugby culture was tangible in my interview with Casey, whom I interviewed in a pub immediately following a game. She was dressed like everyone else there in jeans, a sweatshirt, and a baseball cap. She had an ease about her in the space – it was a basement pub with an Irish-American theme and it felt a bit like Cheers. It was her team's usual watering hole. She waved at the bartender when she arrived and we settled into a corner booth. The space itself looked like any comfortable neighborhood pub in America with stylized stained glass panels around the front door, a heavy wooden bar running along one side of the room, games in the back, and somewhat outdated pop music playing. Casey had chosen the location. She approached the whole interaction with a sense of familiarity, treating me like an old friend and ordering a hamburger and fries while we talked.

This setting and Casey's self-presentation – not just ordinary but deliberately familiar – were typical of my interviews. Being "real" in this sense seems to be quite the opposite of explicit performance. It seems effortless and accidental.

**Real as agentic**

But I also heard repeatedly that rugby players were people who acted, instead of talking or watching others act. "Being a [pro baseball] fan sort of means something to people. But being a [pro baseball] player means even more." (Melinda) This turned out to be a fundamental part of rugby identity, one which I'll return to in subsequent chapters.

Melinda talked about her experience as a mother of a preschooler. She said that she felt different from the other moms on the playground for the simple fact that she moved around with her son. Other mothers would sit on a bench and watch their children,

observing their kids' behavior but staying apart from it. “The playground, right. All the women are like, whew! Fanning in the shade.” (Melinda)

The emphasis on action over words was also evident when I asked players about their reactions to people who disapproved of women's rugby. Rather than discussing reasons that women could or should play the game, most interviewees simply suggested that doubters come out and watch. This shows an ever-present impulse to prove. It also shows an assumption that reliable information comes not from talk but from action.

> *It's 'Yeah, you don’t like the fact that women play rugby? Come watch us.' . . . we’re much better at playing rugby than the men are. The game, our skills, that kind of thing. We don’t just go out there and try to see if we can tear the ear off of our opponent. So it’s like, come out and watch. Let us prove it to you. (Jodi)*

The answer to “who are we?” isn't always conscious, says Tugal (2009:425). So it's important to ask how a group defines its boundaries.[11] Indeed, for many of the players I spoke to, establishing identities as self-determined and individualist women involved distancing themselves from women they saw as passive or self-defeating. “Prissy girls” were mentioned in four different interviews. L.D. voiced annoyance with prissy girls who pretended not to be intelligent, and she said that playing rugby demonstrated to others that she was not one of them. Casey explained that rugby tended to attract confident,

11 See Bourdieu 1977 for more ways to theorize 'the principles of division'.

strong women instead of prissy girls who hate the contact. Prissy is apparently the opposite of tough or confident, and prissy girls are the opposite of rugby women. Why the word prissy? It means more than just finicky. Using that word makes it clear that someone is privileged or protected as well as unfriendly. Using it punishes someone for exhibiting traits that are stereotypically assigned to women. Prissy girls are focused on appearance, not on action. In the most basic sense, a group is defined not by shared characteristics of its members, but by its boundaries (Barth 1969). To these women, then, rugby is about action.

**Realness and the body**

Also evident in these interviews was the conviction that women ought to be judged on their athletic talent or intellect, and not strictly on their appearance. These players seemed to see this transformation – from evaluating their bodies in terms of appearances to evaluating their bodies in terms of their capacity for action – as a major source of personal empowerment. Felicia describes learning to "own her hugeness." She describes looking in the mirror as an adult and saying, "gosh . . . this is a great body!" Melinda tells a similar story:

> *I don't think I stopped judging my body. I had different criteria . . . if [my partner] could lift more than me, I wanted to lift as much. When we would go to the gym I would be like, 'I can't be the one who lifts the least'. Or 'I can't be the slowest. I don't care if I'm not the fastest but I*

*don't want to be the slowest because people will notice.' So, yeah, I still judged things about my body. But a bunch of rugby players going to the beach, everyone wearing bikinis with all different sizes of bodies? I never would have done that, if I didn't play rugby. (Melinda)*

For these players, building physical confidence in women actually seemed possible. They talked about trying to create this for others around them.

*I hope [my daughter] gets it a lot earlier, because I think that will change her life . . . it helped me in every other aspect of my life once I found it. (Felicia)*

*It [rugby] has given me a physical comfort with my own body, just becoming confident in my size and my strength and being proud of the fact that I've got veiny forearms and muscular legs. It's given me something to be proud of. (Felicia)*

Roxanne describes a turning point in her body image:

*It was probably my first or second tackling practice. I looked at girls who were very skinny and narrowly built and didn't have shoulders. Watching them tackle girls, it was so much more difficult for them than it*

*was for me. I just came in low, hit with my shoulder, and thought, "that's why I've got these." . . . Tackling just came so easily and so naturally to me. And I think it's just grown over time as my rugby career has taken off. It's only built my confidence more and more. And there were times when I wouldn't wear tank tops going out because I just felt like I looked so broad. Now I have big shoulder contests with my friends and I make fun of people who have narrower shoulders than me. It's little things like that. (Roxanne)*

According to these women, makeup, high heels, and body shape are not real. Intellect, focus, and accomplishments are real. Movie stars and models are not real. Engineers, scientists, and writers are real. Athletes are certainly real. Female politicians are sometimes very, very real, and sometimes not real at all. Muscles are real. Eating a lot can be real, and so can belching. So is the body real? Not always. The feminized body is unreal. But the female body is real, especially when it creates possibilities instead of limitations. (In L.D.'s words, "Strong women have existed forever. Birthing a child is huge. And I think we don't get credit for that a lot of the time.") In these terms, to have physical confidence is to be connected to the real parts of the self.

**Individual identities, group style**

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that the meanings rugby holds for the players in this study could be divided into two categories: individual and cultural. These two collections of meanings dictate the self-definitions, values, and social relationships

that are available in this context. If we follow Tilly's understanding of identity as a relationship (transaction) and Alexander and Smith's understanding of culture as a complex enactment of identities, we can see that when the women in this study describe commitment, community, and agency, they are really describing aspects of their identities as rugby players.

Following Brubaker and Cooper (2000), identity is best seen as a "category of practice rather than a category of analysis". Tugal (2009:425) takes this to mean that it's not particularly useful to refer just to identity itself. Instead, he refers to specifics: "identity formation", "identity work" and so on. I share this perspective. Identity is a practice, a process. In Tilly's terms, it's a relationship. Tilly writes that "every social site has as many identities as it does social relations" (2002:11). Any one of those identities is bounded – it makes the owner distinct from other individuals – but it is meanwhile bound into a collection of stories and meanings, and also languages. Tilly also states that identity is a combination of the experience of belonging to a group plus external recognition. What does it mean to belong? Answering this question will allow us to see how the individual-level meanings of rugby intersect with its cultural-level meanings.

If identity is an ongoing process, so is belonging. This is precisely what culture is for. It makes individuals belong. Alexander and Smith understand culture as a collection of symbols that form a structure, which then creates order and consistency in everyday human life. When individuals act in accordance with this structure (indeed, when the choices they perceive for themselves arise from it), Alexander calls this performance. Performance involves a foreground, constituted by the immediate and practical

exigencies of the individual's situation. At the same time it includes a background, constituted by a vast collection of collective social meanings (Alexander 2004:530). It is through taking foreground action in the context of background meanings that an individual cements herself into her social group. This is how she creates both her individual identity and her cultural identity. For example, as I type this paragraph, I feel the pressure of the keys under my fingers and imagine myself to be a hard-working productive writer. In a practical sense, I add a few words to my dissertation. I also identify myself with images of writers that span expanses of space and time. I become a writer; I belong to the category of writers. This is cemented when others observe my writing performance and perceive me further as a member of this category. Experience and meaning are inseparable, because we can't have the physical experience without instantaneously assigning meaning to it. Experience and meaning come together into boundaries and commonalities, and that set of social relations is an identity.

I venture into this theoretical discussion at this point in the dissertation because it seems I have two levels of analysis: the individual rugby player, and rugby culture. I am choosing to acknowledge them both but not to choose one at the expense of the other, or even to separate them. Instead, I discuss both, focusing particularly on the processes that link them.

One very useful framework for examining these processes come from Eliasoph and Licherman's (2003) concept of group style. Essentially, they propose that individual agency (usually thought of as the opposite of social structure) be understand as a social process itself. This is not far from Alexander's idea of performance as the connector

between individual experience and social structure. Eliasoph and Lichterman's object of study is the way that make sense of their own lives in the context of social structure – and they propose that people do this more collectively than we might expect. Symbols and codes are consistent, but they are also flexible. They have the potential to be interpreted in multiple ways. Group style is a localized cultural structure (as it sounds, specific to a social group) that dictates how other cultural processes will be enacted.

My interviews, observation, and prior experience as a rugby player all lead me to describe women in rugby, and women's rugby itself, as spirited. The spirit of women's rugby is in many senses a spirit of defiance. In the next chapter I will investigate this oppositional aspect of rugby's group style.

## CHAPTER FOUR: A spirit of defiance

*There's a contact element that separates rugby from other sports, I think. You can lump ice hockey and football into rugby here. I think that because you're kind of out of the norm in terms of what is socially acceptable for what a woman to do as an athlete, there's a degree of self-confidence involved in that. At least some element of your personality is, 'fuck you, I don't care what you think of what I do. (Tracy)*

In the previous chapter I discussed the tension between individualist and collectivist values in rugby. In this chapter I will shift the focus to another aspect of rugby culture: a solid, consistent sense of defiance. My observations and interviews show that these women constantly describe themselves as outlaws and derive power through challenging authority.

Almost every player in my sample recounted stories of being held accountable for her nonconformist behavior. Almost every player expressed a general feeling of defiance.[12] And almost every player described a willful resistance to gender norms. The most prominent challenge I observed was targeted at the constraints of the gender system. Since the very existence of women's rugby stands out as an instance of gender transgression, gender is constantly made salient. The intense salience of gender consistently leads individual rugby players' generalized defiance to become a specialized defiance of gender norms; at the same time, the fact of the sport itself carries a spirit of

12 This is consistent with Dworkin's findings. In her interviews with female weightlifters, the words "power" "strength" and "independence" were followed by "rebellion" (2003: 144).

defiance.

In this chapter I begin by describing current understandings of what gender is and how it works. Next I explore the oppositional quality of this culture. What place does challenge to authority hold in rugby? How does it get expressed? First, I examine the cultural challenge that the fact of women's rugby poses. The simple fact that women play rugby can be seen as an act of defiance. Second, I investigate the ways that players in my sample challenge gender. I observe three distinct patterns of behavior, all of which seem to be strategies for negotiating the conflicting demands that gender places on the individual. Finally, I discuss transgression in a theoretical sense. What does it really mean to challenge gender, both inside and outside the context of rugby?

## 4.1 Defying gender

### Gender as an institution

Before we can move further into understanding the challenge waged by these rugby players, we need to settle on a shared understanding of what gender is and how it functions. I adopt Scott's definition of gender as (1) a constitutive element of social relationships based in perceived differences and (2) a way of signifying power relationships (1986). First, we must understand gender identity as an accomplishment, following West and Zimmerman (1987). Second, we must recognize that gender inequality is reproduced through regular social interactions. For this second point I rely on Risman's multilevel model (2004, 1998) and Ridgeway's theory of status characteristics (1999).

West and Zimmerman emphasize the importance of understanding sex, sex categorization, and gender as distinct concepts/processes. Sex is a set of biological traits. Sex categorization is a social process that sorts people according to those traits. Gender is the process by which individuals manage their behaviors and identities in accordance with prevalent norms prescribed for sex categories (1987:127). These three concepts are often conflated in everyday life and in scholarship, and we must disaggregate them in order to understand how they function.

In this view, gender is an ongoing everyday interaction-level accomplishment. Through it, resources and constraints that are organized along sex categories are produced, reproduced, and given social force. The fact of accountability brings the individual into contact with social structures: here structural constraints actively constitute the individual, and the individual's actions constitute the content of social structures.

Gender is a means by which large-scale social organization (macro) becomes part of an individual (micro). A person is brought into the context of existing gender norms and begins to create an identity according to them. Every time that person crosses a boundary – that is, fails to do gender – he or she must provide an explanation of her behavior, or else risk penalties. Gender functions as a macro-level system, but an individual's identity hinges on how well her behavior fits it.

Rudman and Glick's study showing that agentic women are often punished if they do not "temper their agency with niceness" (2001:743), nicely illustrates the "doing gender" theory. It supports the assertion that individuals are required to account for any

deviations from gender norms, and it also supports the idea that gender is not a consistent and invariable set of rules. There is room in prevalent gender structures for agentic women, but only insofar as they are able to adjust to maintain their feminine identities. And, as West and Zimmerman explain, it is the deviant individual rather than the entire community who must carry the responsibility of changing norms.

Like any institution, gender itself shifts over time to accommodate the specific ways that individuals do gender.

### 4.2 Expressing defiance through rugby

#### Cultural-level defiance

The simple existence of women's rugby poses a challenge to the gender system. Women have historically been excluded from team sports in general (Messner et al. 2001; Hargreaves 1994; Birrel and Cole 1994; Kimmel and Sabo 1990). Although Title IX has created more opportunities for female athletes, women's access to sport remains constrained (Costa and Guthrie 1994; Theberge 1994). From early childhood, girls and boys are directed into different types of play and leisure, with girls encouraged to participate in quiet activities and boys encouraged to play sports. Girls are systematically taught to restrict their movements, rather than explore their physical power (Wachs 2003, Dowling 2000). Distinctions are drawn between sports that are seen as appropriate for girls, such as gymnastics, and those that are seen as appropriate for boys, such as wrestling (Hardin and Greer 2009; Wachs 2003:179; Koivula 1995; Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Kane 1988). When women do participate in sport they are often

automatically assumed to be at a physical disadvantage (Burton Nelson 1995; Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994) and are often treated disrespectfully, especially by coaches and male athletes, when they do choose to play (Wachs 2003).

Rugby in particular has been a "male preserve" (Dunning and Sheard 2013, 1973; Schacht 1996; Burton Nelson 1995). This sport comes out of a history of privilege, as we saw in Chapter Two. The presence of women on the modern-day field is itself a challenge to an established social order. This was evident in my data.

> *We had a banquet for the 1978 women who started the Kestrels. And they were telling stories about when they first started playing. About how hard it was to even get a women's team. They traveled for nationals to some city out west. The mayor got up and said his speech and said, you know, you're tainting the sport, and women don't belong on the field. And that was his mayor's speech for the tournament. (Amy)*

This brings to mind Roxanne's story (recounted in Chapter Three) about a man she encountered on the subway.

> *He saw me carrying my rugby bag . . . he said, 'Rugby bag? You don't play rugby!' I was like, [firmly] 'Yes, I do.' He was like, 'No, you don't! Women don't play rugby.' And I was like, 'Yes, we do. You have a national women's team in South Africa. You might not know it, but you*

*do.' And he was just like, 'No, that's ridiculous. I've never heard of that.'*

*(Roxanne)*

Not all elements of women's sports are transgressive. Theberge argues that the women's fitness movement is sexualizing rather than empowering (1987). Similarly, Dworkin observes that women themselves often use sport/fitness to exaggerate physical differences between male and female bodies. In women's bodybuilding, strength and size are mediated by culturally prescribed femininity (Dworkin 2001, 2003:134). Dworkin's subjects specifically mentioned a fear of becoming a threat to men if they (women) become too strong or their muscles became too bulky. My interviewees also referred to men they'd dated who "couldn't handle" their strength, or made jokes about where boyfriends/husbands wanted the line drawn.

Rugby seems to be a notable exception to this trend. Howe writes that "women's rugby distorts the male hegemony of the rugby subculture by exploring female physical capabilities in a typical enclave" (2003:235). One element that sets rugby apart is dress. Uniforms may seem like a superficial aspect of a sport; however, they feminized uniforms have historically been used to make women's athletic endeavors seem publicly acceptable (Festle 1996). Many athletic traditions require women to wear sexualized versions of men's uniforms. In women's bodybuilding these requirements extend to hairstyles and makeup. In rugby, as in boxing, men and women wear exactly the same uniforms (Howe 2003:235). It's not just that they share similar styling — rather, women purchase rugby jerseys, shorts, and boots cut for men, available in men's sizes. This

practice reveals a different approach to gender than the one seen in figure skating, for example, where costumes are highly stylized to exaggerate gender differences. There is no softer "women's version" of rugby. This heightens the symbolic power of women's presence in this formerly male preserve.

When women cross these boundaries they pay for it. As Griffin (1998), Cahn (1994), Blinde and Taub (1992), and Lenskij (1987) all show, female athletes often face a lesbian stigma that makes sports participation difficult for both straight and queer women. When women or men act out of line with gender regulations, they are held accountable (West and Zimmerman 1987). The burden of justification falls on the the individual. When women are perceived as competent/strong/agentic, as in rugby, they are generally seen as less likeable (Rudman and Glick 2008, 2001). Likeability (friendship status) suffers. Riemer and Feltz (1995) conducted an experiment in which they showed visual images of stereotypically feminine and androgynous girls to high school students. When asked to indicate girls who might be potential friends, boys tended to chose the feminine-looking images. For a girl or a woman, perceived gender deviance has real social costs. For a professional athlete, it can carry financial costs too. It has not been unusual for corporate sponsors of golf, tennis, and other sports to withdraw sponsorship of players who are rumored to be lesbian (Creedon 1994:282). And it is easier for female athletes to win prestige and publicity if they clearly fit gender stereotypes (Wright and Clarke 1999; Kane and Lenskyj 1998; Bryson 1987).

**Individual-level defiance**

The women I spoke to were conscious that they were involved in a contest over resources and self-respect. During interviews, I asked players to describe their typical response to encountering a gender-based barrier.

> *For me, that is the green light to prove them wrong. In any way I possibly can. I'll do whatever it is for it to make them eat their words. (Sandy)*

> *What is somebody telling me that I cannot do? Can I not dive to the bottom of the lake or can I not pick this person up? I tend to typically go right to showing them how I can. Whether it's to dive right in the water to prove it or it's picking them up and squat them or something." (Sam)*

> *I do okay until someone thinks I can't do it. That job where I was weed-eating and doing things in the bone garden? They tried to get me to quit. They were like, you can't do this. You won't last. I was like, no, I will last. You're not going to get me to quit. So it's to prove people wrong. My brother who plays rugby was like, 'I don't think she'd be very good.' And I was like, 'Watch me. I'm going to be really good and I'm going to play really well.' (Jenna)*

Many of these women explained that rugby culture, as well as attracting women who tended to challenge constraints, supported and developed a sense of challenge in them. They generally described this as a positive force.

> *I don't know what it is about rugby, but I think it attracts a certain kind of woman. If that is someone who is apt to challenge gender stereotypes or someone who is more inclined to be aggressive or lack some social niceties, then so be it. (Roxanne)*

> *There are a lot of subliminal messages out there about what women's roles are and what you can and can't do. And once you do something like rugby, you're so far outside of what general expectations are that you learn to transfer that over to your regular life and sort of not care too much whether people like the way you dress but figure out how I like to dress. (Petra)*

The same player, describing her own development since the mid-nineties:

> *I think that it empowered me to go further down the road. Especially just the fact that you take outsiders stereotypes. There are women on our team who defy gender stereotype a lot more than I do, and I think that if you're not one of those women, maybe then your first response is to pull*

*back a little bit but, just the way society would like. And then to realize after a long time in the community, not a long time, but you realize how little that matters to who a person really is. I mean in that sense I guess I worry less about the side I present to the world and worry a lot more who I really am. And that's really liberating because it takes a lot of extra energy to present yourself in a way that a world expects you to as a woman. It's not very gratifying stuff to be worrying about your appearance or the way you talk or the way you come across, versus what is it on the inside. (Petra)*

Perhaps some of the defiance is a defensive response to the barrage of external challenges. Women play rugby? Isn't that a rough sport? Aren't rough sports reserved for men? How can someone be authentically feminine and even want to play a game like that? How can someone be physically female and able (strong enough, fast enough, coordinated enough) to play a game like that? These questions never really fade for female rugby players. They are constantly asked to justify their apparent breaches of gender norms. And some part of this defiance may be an attitude players bring to rugby. The sport may attract people who gravitate toward oppositional identities. One player I interviewed in the pilot study presented a mild and soft-spoken demeanor. She took great pleasure in describing a morning bicycle commute during which she liked to shout obscenities at a man who regularly demonstrated in front of a local women's clinic.

Rugby may offer a site for agency in gender. The gender system can make

individuals feel helpless, and this may be a space in which they can feel that they are doing something useful to resist. Again I look to Howe to summarize this: "women who play rugby . . . can be agents in the resistance against hegemonic masculinity and offer an active, female physicality that can challenge the gender order." (2003: 235) Howe found that many of his interviewees were drawn to the game specifically because rugby contradicted images of traditional femininity (2003: 232).

But it's not possible defy everything about a system and still live comfortably within its boundaries. Women obviously do play rugby, and that fact does not mean that they are no longer women. Some of them resolve this tension by embracing social roles off the field that put them supposedly in a gender category other than the dominant central feminine image. This may involve being openly gay, being stocky or tall, cropping their hair, and dressing androgynously – that is, choosing not to engage in certain feminine practices. Others struggle to stay in the dominant feminine category. They may overcompensate with longer hair, shorter skirts, and more jewelry off the field. Most find a place somewhere in between that makes sense to them, thereby "each cutting their own deal with gender" (Kimmel 2000:16). Gender matters in the lives of these players. Their presence on the field sets up an apparent paradox that they have to resolve in order to maintain basic social legitimacy.

### 4.3 Negotiating gender

Living in the context of gender is really a process of creating identity through negotiating conflicting pressures. These conflicting pressures are quite evident in

women's rugby.

**Three strategies**

> *I was in a bar when I was, like, 19 . . . it was this whole thing, whether I could pick up this guy or not. And I just picked him up and threw him over my shoulder and walked around with him . . . Physically picked him up. He probably weighed like 240 pounds. And so that was a big thing - all his friends were like, I can't believe you let a girl pick you up*
> *(Angela)*

In the previous chapter I defined identity as a set of ongoing social relations (that is, boundaries and commonalities) produced through experience and meaning. We must also remember that identity is vital to power distribution. Some characteristics are functionally power-neutral, at least in certain situations. Others, status characteristics, are directly tied to social location. The most important of these status characteristics, race, class, and gender, are so vital to the ways people sort each other that it's very difficult to interact with someone unless you know which category to put them in (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Gender, which is important in the case of women's rugby, is one of these characteristics. If you can't recall anything else about a person, you can recall their gender (Stangor et al. 1992).

To the extent that identity is connected to power distribution, of course it is contested. Controlling identity – your own and others' – is useful. Social movement

scholars have shown us how political identities are deliberately managed (Rupp and Taylor 1999; Bernstein 1997). In this chapter, though, I will not focus on political identities. I will focus on some of the primary personal identities found in rugby culture. Some of them do have political content (that is, they are connected to the distribution of power). But the identities I am interested in here are not as explicitly managed as political identities are.

If we return to West and Zimmerman and also Alexander, we can see that every conscious display of gender identity in this setting is vulnerable to being read as a performance, whether players like it or not.

Let's return for a moment to the "prissy girls" characterization I described in Chapter Three. Most interviewees emphasized women's culpability in creating and re-creating gender inequality. Many, like L.D., made comments that specifically distanced themselves from certain other types of women. Several criticized conventionally feminine women – particularly women who didn't raise their hands in class, or women who were afraid to tackle. Others, like Felicia and Amy, just emphasized looking up to confident women. Every interviewee talked about valuing confidence, although they varied in whether they (1) focused on confidence as a desirable product of sports, or (2) focused on the lack of confidence as a negative personality trait in women they disliked. This also came up in discussions of whether women and girls have adequate access to sports. More than one interviewee said that women do have access, but fail to take advantage of it. For some interviewees, that meant that women faced intangible obstacles (like cultural expectations, lack of visibility of existing athletes, fear of losing

femininity or fear of making too much noise), even when athletic programs were technically available to them. For other interviewees, the burden fell primarily on the women: women who did not participate in available programs simply chose not to be strong enough to overcome the obstacles facing them.

Messner argues that active denial of the feminine is a central component of masculine identity. In *Playing Center*, he argues that violence plays a major part in this rejection of the feminine. He does not suggest that all men or all boys involved in sports act violently toward women, but he does consider this attitude to be at the center of sport. He suggests that violence against women is not merely an individual pathology; rather, it is generated from "the normal everyday dynamics at the center of male athletic culture" (2002:28). Major themes in this space are the conquest of women, a suppression of empathy, and a code of silent loyalty to a high-status athletic fraternity (2002:60). This translates into a hyper-exclusion of women from this realm. Women who play rugby are clearly not interested in excluding women from athletics – obviously it is the the opposite. But they may end up actively excluding feminine characteristics, insofar as they themselves adopt traditionally masculine traits and values.

The agency/structure dichotomy, then, is more than just a theoretical debate. It is a major axis along which gender is constructed and internalized. Men are expected (and expect) to act; women are expected (and expect) to help set the scene for action, often through recognizable support activities like housekeeping or cheerleading. In this context it is weak (feminine) to fail to be an agent. Women's rugby culture is founded on this set of values. However, it is clear that these women want the world to change so that they

and others like them are allowed to be agents. And in order to break down constraints, one must first identify them. So these athletes are left in a bind between focusing on agency and focusing on structure. Since these demands seem unreconcilable, these women swing back and forth to maintain a feeling of balance.

> *It's been happening for ten years with me – every time we play rugby and then we go out at night, and we get dressed up and look good, someone's always got to say something, like "oh, you clean up really well." It's just always on everyone's radar. I'm not sure if they're surprised, or if we surprise ourselves, or we're proud of it, or what. It's definitely mentioned. It's thought of. (Amy)*

In these players, I see three strategies for negotiating these pressures: (1) acquiring male privilege at the individual level without directly questioning structural constraints, (2) calling attention to the injustices of structural constraints, and (3) professing to ignore structural constraints (a strategy that is perhaps impossible to realize).

***Acquiring privilege without questioning the system***

First, some focus on acquiring male privilege for themselves. Breaking the rules and blatantly enjoying freedoms they aren't supposed to (according to traditional gender restrictions) is a way to challenge the system. Felicia reveals this strategy with her joking

retort to my question about the sort of women she admires: “I like a nice rack.” This comment places Felicia (a lesbian woman) in a position to consume female sexuality, which in itself may be transgressive; however, it doesn’t challenge the idea that female sexuality is something to be consumed.

Similarly, many players invested a great deal of energy into framing themselves as one of the boys. Jenna, for whom conventional femininity is very important, says, “I’ve never had cute little prissy jobs. Steel-toe boots, hard hat, lifting stuff . . . like huge pieces of metal.” These women told stories of being either the exceptionally talented tomboy who was allowed to play baseball with the boys or the only sister whose main social influences were her brothers. These stories about being accepted as one of the boys provides these women with a sense of power. This was especially apparent in the pilot interview with Carol. She answered every interview question in a way that deliberately emphasized her agency and set her apart from other women. Carol explains, “I just haven’t done the normal, run-of-the-mill things that women do . . . I was never one of those women who just stood around waiting for someone to help them.” She talks at length about her superior athletic skill, her entrepreneurial spirit, and her skills with car engines. All of these comments are clearly meant to derive status: rather than describing success despite gender constraints, she describes behaviors that move her from a low-status feminine category into a higher-status masculine category. Again, we see that this strategy does not directly challenge structural inequality.

***Questioning structural constraints***

Some focus on the unfairness of the rules. L.D., a law student, referred to structural inequality over and over in her interview. She described societal pressures that encourage men but not women to succeed in business affairs and rape laws that don't recognize married women's control over their own bodies. Becky also takes this strategy. Citing workplace inequality and the gender pay gap, Becky says "We [women] push every day . . . because it's fundamentally unfair! And it's not right! And I would hope that every other women feels the same way I do. Things should be fair."

This is a markedly different approach than that of, say, Sandy or Janet. Sandy reports that men are "always going to make more money" than women. "They're always going to have more opportunity to advance more, quicker." But then she adds "I prefer not to think about that, because I'm not really in a job or area where it really is going to affect me." Yet the two professional roles she discusses — athletic coaching and working at a male-dominated job doing physical labor — are textbook examples of fields with high levels of gender discrimination. Janet, a gym teacher, says that "there's really no gender inequality in the schools" and that women and men occupy leadership positions in education equitably. By contrast, L.D., Becky, and others who adopted the unfairness strategy placed deliberate pressure on social institutions, hoping to see increasing structural equality in the future. Predictably, women who adopted this strategy were more likely to report affiliations with women's organizations.

***Professing to ignore structural constraints***

Some ignore the existing rules and make their own, seemingly successful in staying insulated from what others think. Tracy, Petra, and Meg take this approach. This is different than strategy #1 in that these players do not emphasize the power they derive from enacting typically masculine behavior or from winning approval from men. Several, like Meg, credit their parents for raising girls who truly believed they could achieve anything they attempted.

> *I would say that I don't buy into what society says a woman should do. If I want to wear a dress, I wear a dress. But not because someone expects me to. If I want to not, then, you know. I don't wear makeup. I don't do my hair. I wear whatever the hell I want. (Tracy)*

Most players in the larger sample profess to ignore structural constraints but don't seem successful at it. It is a widely shared ideal, but only a small handful of players seem to achieve it — and even then in a somewhat limited way.

The players who do seem to accomplish this strategy are all older players who are well-respected in the rugby community. Several of them are Eagles. They have a confidence that sets them apart even from their rugby-playing peers. It's possible that their own high status insulates them from the more personal consequences of gender nonconformity. It's also possible that their high status and longstanding commitment to the community have allowed them to create a dense social network inside the rugby

world that shelters them from external gender constraints. Let's return to this quote from Petra:

> *I think there are a lot of subliminal messages out there about what women's roles are and what you can and can't do. And once you do something like rugby, you're sort of so far outside of what general expectations are that you learn to transfer that over to your regular life and sort of not care too much whether people like the way you dress but figure out how I like to dress.*

However, the majority of the players in the sample combine these strategies. Gloria enjoys the male privilege that's available to her, but she also talks passionately about creating opportunities for young girls to do the same thing.

I don't provide a count of the players who fit each of these three categories because it's not plausible to count them. The three strategies named above aren't really three discrete approaches taken by three discrete segments of this population. Rather, each player seems to adopt a mixture of the three strategies. This is consistent with Kimmel's statement that "each of us cuts our own deal with gender" and with Reger's assertion that identity work is literally hard work.

The underlying question, then: what does it really mean to challenge gender? It means doing the arduous, often painful, and often exciting work of negotiating between these three strategies (which are really identities).

**Transgression**

What shall we call the spirit of defiance I've described in this chapter? How do players make sense of the identity conflict that comes with gender-atypical behavior? The transgressive impulse written into this culture helps them to resolve – or at least live with – this particular contradiction.

Social movement scholars have had much to say about boundaries.[13] Through practices, characteristics, and narratives, social groups divide themselves from other social groups and create internal bonds. Boundaries make it possible for us to arrange ourselves into distinct groups. Of course there are interstices and overlaps. Individuals sometimes fall outside defined groups or belong to two groups at once. And of course individuals move across boundaries.

Transgression is not the act of moving across a boundary. The composition of the word itself might lead us to the first definition that the Oxford English Dictionary provides: “passing beyond the bounds of legality or right”. In an identity sense, this does not capture it. The Oxford definition continues: “a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin” (OED). When an individual moves wholly across a boundary, leaving one group behind and joining another, there is no pressure for the first group to change. When an individual chooses to remain in one group but pushes against its practices and narratives, this is transgression. It is as much an affirmation as it is a rejection: the individual's call for change is accompanied by a reinforcement of his/her membership in the group.

13 For more see Tilly 2005, Taylor and Whittier 1992, and Gamson 1997.

Transgression, then, is identity work (Reger 2008). It's not a simple rejection of the system you come from. It is a process of deciding which parts of a cultural system to stay connected to and which parts to challenge. Foucault writes that transgression brings to light past as well as present. It "ultimately passes judgment" (1977:33, 49). When I use this term, I refer to a process of figuring out your own identity. It's not possibly to break every rule of a culture and still be a recognizable member of that culture. At a individual level, transgression involves evaluating one's society and one's place in it, deciding what doesn't fit the individual and what needs to be changed, and then breaking those rules – while making sure not to break the others.

I take two distinct perspectives in this project, a social movements approach and a sociology of gender approach, and it is worth pausing to discuss them here. The social movement perspective requires us to conceptualize conflict as an interaction between two (sometimes more) distinct entities. One entity holds coercive power over the other. The underdog is assumed, more or less, to hold truth/legitimacy. McAdam's study of the American civil rights movement (1982) is a classic example of this approach.

The gender perspective involves a more Foucauldian model of power. It requires us to emphasize the capacity of institutions, particularly the institution of gender, to create certain types of individuals. The basic model for this approach is Risman's multilevel theory of gender. At the micro level, individuals are socialized to acquire gendered characteristics, tastes, and habits. At the interactional level, continued interactions between gendered individuals and pattern small-group social structures according to gender. And at the macro level, large-scale social structures reward and

punish people according to their compliance with gender norms.

The reason I draw this distinction here is that these two different conceptualizations of power require two different ideas of resistance. In the first, a collection of less powerful agents can marshal its resources in order to pressure a more powerful structure. It's like a tug-of-war competition during which the trophy sits on the sideline in plain sight until it's clearly won and awarded. In the second conceptualization, defining teams and struggles becomes more complex. When gender (or another comparable organizing principle) is applied at so many levels simultaneously, Foucault's web and Weber's reflexive institutions are more appropriate frames than competition metaphors. In a later chapter I will suggest that the resolution to this tension between the social movements perspective and the gender perspective is to continue imagining the tug-of-war but to substitute identity as the resource being fought over.

## CHAPTER FIVE: The transformative potential of women's rugby

In previous chapters I have attempted to understand this sport's culture through the experiences of participants. In this chapter I will shift away from an ethnographic perspective and instead explore the ways that the case of women's rugby can contribute to widespread social change. In Chapter One, I suggested that the case women's rugby is significant because these women's actions and motivations (1) seem commensurate with the actions and motivations of formally organized movement activists; (2) trouble the personal/public divide; and (3) interrupt institutional gender processes at the interactional level, creating a real potential for change. In this chapter I will look more closely at these three phenomena.

### 5.1 Women's rugby as a social movement

First of all, I contend that the women I interviewed are involved in a social movement. Why do I bother making this argument? I make it because it's a key point to PPT scholars. At every conference where I've presented on some aspect of this study, I've been grilled on whether this "counts" as a social movement — and therefore merits academic attention. After analyzing this data I'm convinced that it is indeed a movement. I'm also convinced that being a movement isn't the only significant aspect of women's rugby. However, let's begin this chapter with evidence that this is indeed part of a movement.

#### Classifying this case

There has been much discussion in recent PPT publications about the precise

definition of a social movement. Not only have Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam explicitly divided contention, politics, contentious politics, and collective action, but they have gone to the trouble of emphasizing these divisions with a Venn diagram that has appeared in more than one of their major works (2001, 2007). In their most recent book (2007:4-5) they define contention as claimsmaking, politics as interaction with the state, and collective action as any form of coordinated work in the name of a shared interest. Contentious politics, they write, is the intersection of these three processes. It occurs when collective claims are waged against the state.

Their attention to these discrete definitions arises from the increasing tendency of scholars of social change to use social movements as a general term for many different forms of protest. The boundary most often drawn in PPT is between one-time protest events and sustained, systematic efforts: episodes of passionate and sometimes spontaneous collective action are not subject to the same type of analysis that Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam have developed to understand what they call movement campaigns.

This distinction does not rule out the everyday activism of female athletes. Women's rugby is not a fad: eight of the nine teams I studied have been in existence for over 30 years. The first ones were formed in the mid-1970s, and their organizational structures have strengthened over time. It's true that the social meanings of women playing contact sports must certainly have shifted through the decades, and it's not possible for a researcher to travel back in time to collect longitudinal data. However, anecdotal evidence from older players does suggest that rugby was seen as even more

politically ground-breaking in the 1970s than it is now. While the “old girls” who told me stories about their earliest experiences with the sport comprise a self-selected sample (these are the players who remain connected to rugby culture even after retiring), that selection process makes their stories of transgression even more significant. We see again that a spirit of gender rebellion has become part of contemporary rugby's historical narrative.

Going back to Tarrow (1998:2), social movements are “sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents”. By this definition the movement for women’s equality in sport certainly can be understood as a social movement – that is, the formally organized part of the movement easily fits this definition. Let's take a break from this theoretical discussion to review the formal part of the movement.

**Development of the movement**

We can see that American women are engaged in sports. They are running marathons, playing hockey, figure skating, boxing, and playing rugby. But it hasn’t always been this way. The “first wave of athletic feminism” came just after the First World War, in the 1920s and 1930s. This was a high point for American sports in general, possibly because the war brought attention to men’s physical fitness and possibly (at least initially) because of changes in the American economy that allowed for an emphasis on leisure. In any event, women enjoyed a surge in physical activity at the same time that

men did. American women first participated in the Olympics in 1920. Advertising images of women engaged in sport became popular through the 1920s and into the 1930s (Creedon 1994:114). Interest and opportunity waned in the 1940s, and the second wave of American athletic feminism came in the 1970s. In between, the National Section for Girls and Women's Sports and later the Division of Girls and Women's Sports became formal organizing bodies for women's athletics. These associations led to the 1971 formation of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW). Rather than simply implementing rules and programs, the AIAW actively worked at expanding women's athletic opportunities (Morrison 1993). Then came Title IX.

Tarrow explains that "contentious politics is triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives for social actors who lack resources on their own" (1998:2). In other words, participants are mobilized when the structure shifts and creates something for individuals to gain from collective action. Title IX has been one such mobilizing opportunity. Title IX is a section of a 1972 law requiring federally-funded educational institutions to provide equal opportunities to both genders. The portion of the law that specifies equality in athletics does not actually refer directly to sports programs: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance"[14]. However, the athletic consequence of the law has attracted the most attention over the last thirty years, possibly because athletics has been the hardest institution to change. Title IX, which

14 Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is available at http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/coord/titleixstat.php.

covers participation opportunities, equipment, facilities, scholarships, and coaching resources, has been attacked from the beginning by athletic administrators who are resistant to changing the gender balance. Complaints have come from male athletes and coaches whose universities chose to cut their teams (typically wrestling or volleyball) rather than downsize men's football and basketball budgets, which together make up 72 percent of the total average athletic operating budget for men's athletics at a Division I-A university. However, 72 percent of schools that added teams between 1992 and 2000 were able to avoid cutting any teams at all (Women's Sports Foundation 2003). This is one very concrete example of the contestation of meaning between the movement for women's inclusion in sport and the existing male-dominated athletic system.

Ongoing tensions over Title IX have sparked new energies from women's groups. In 2002, the Department of Education under the Bush administration created the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics to review Title IX. Proponents of women's athletics were noticeably underrepresented on the commission, and the two members who were willing to argue for Title IX's continued enforcement complained when the commission secretary publicly reported two major decisions (both weakening the original legislation) as "unanimous" despite their vocal dissent. A renewed wave of activism swept through feminist and women's sports networks. Supporters of Title IX demonstrated outside the commission's hearings while movement organizations launched a slew of education campaigns and petitions.

In response to the latest challenges to the law, an education campaign called "savetitleix.com" formed with the support of over forty nonprofit organizations ranging

from the Ms. Foundation for Women to the national Parent Teacher Assocation and the American Psychological Association. The controversy surrounding this legislation has produced a network of advocates and actors through which the movement has taken form. Existing national feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), the Feminist Majority, and the National Association of University Women have added Title IX to their lists of "action issues," alongside abortion, women's health, wage parity, and other items generally placed on feminist agendas. The message that women have a right to participate equally in athletics is reaching a growing network of interested actors.

And Title IX has indeed fostered higher levels of female participation. While the law requires that equal opportunities be provided, it does not specify equal use of those opportunities, so an increase in participation can be understood as an expression of genuine interest. In 1972, the year that Title IX was put into place, the average high school offered about 2 sports teams for girls. In 2004, that number is 8.32 (Acosta 2004:5). In 1972, one in 27 high school girls played on a varsity team; now one in 2.5 does. Recent US successes in international competition, such as the 1999 Women's World Cup in soccer and the string of Olympic medals earned by American female athletes in 2000, have been attributed to Title IX (Bernstein 2002:416). And 38 percent of women now believe that "increasing the number of girls who participate in organized sports is a top priority for a new women's movement." (Women's Sports Foundation 2003:23)

In sum, the story of this struggle fits Tarrow's framework. This is a "collective challenge, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction

with elites, opponents, and authorities" (1998:4). It is comprised of individuals acting collectively through an existing structure in order to build new structures and new identities. This movement, like others, involves political opportunities and constraints; its development has been responsive to structural changes such as Title IX. It certainly creates new opportunities for individuals. It has involved a repertoire of contention that has included traditional feminist forms of protest. The movement itself creates a shared set of goals, a shared culture, and a shared identity for many, although (as I mentioned above) not all female athletes think of themselves as feminists or find more solidarity with other female athletes. It is based in existing networks but also creates and strengthens new ones. And its development has rested on the constructing of frames and the contestation of meaning.

**Current state of the formal movement**

It is common understanding that women's participation in sports, along with women's deliberate advocacy and organizing around their participation in sports, has grown over the last 20 years. Without gathering new survey data, how can we measure the actual growth of the women's sports movement?

Insofar as participation itself can be a form of resistance, we can examine overall rates of women's involvement in sports. A review of NCAA participation statistics shows a consistent and substantial increase in the number of women involved in intercollegiate sports (NCAA 2007). Adult amateur participation rates are more difficult to measure, since informal sports leagues do not always maintain public records (like websites) or

have national affiliates. Participation in professional sports is much easier to measure. Athletic leagues, such as the Women's National Basketball Association and the now-defunct American Basketball League, rely on public relations to sell tickets. We have seen a recent increase in women's professional teams. In 2003, *RealSports* magazine reported fifteen different professional sports leagues for women. Pro volleyball, softball, basketball, soccer, and football have all appeared on the scene, although not all of them have managed to stay in operation for very long. The formation of professional teams indicates that women are interested in playing and that corporate sponsors believe that the public is interested in watching them play. It is a sign of some public acceptance of the movement.

Some researchers have also looked to the Olympics for signs of growing women's involvement in sport. It does provide a measure of participation: in the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, women competed in 157 events and made up nearly 40 percent of the total athletes.[15] A study of American print coverage of the 1996 Games found general equity in the amount and type of coverage of male and female athletes; however, the authors of the study also suggested that US athletic and media authorities were particularly interested in maintaining the appearance of gender equity during the Olympics (Eastman and Billings 1999). Efforts toward equal coverage did not continue to the same extent after the conclusion of the Games. A month-long analysis of ESPN's "SportsCenter" in the spring of 2002, for example, found 778 stories featuring male

15 International Olympic Committee (IOC). 2001. "Promotion of Women in Sport." Report available at http://www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/index_uk.asp.

athletes and only 16 featuring female athletes. Furthermore, only 10 of the 127 active members of the International Olympic Committee, and no members of its Executive Committee Board, were women in 2002 (Women's Sports Foundation 2003:7-11). An examination of the Olympics, then, shows poor female representation in leadership roles even while it shows increasing participation of female athletes. There is no question that female athletes and their advocates are challenging a powerful system.

The development of membership associations and advocacy associations shows that much of this participation has been a result of self-conscious mobilization. The Women's Sports Foundation has become a leader in advocating for female athletes. It strives to educate the public about the challenges faced by the movement and serves as a link to the now-extensive network of related organizations. The Women's Sports Foundation website contains direct links to the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport, Girls Incorporated, and other movement associations. Existing feminist organizations have become advocates for women's sports; both the National Organization for Women website[16] and the Feminist Majority website [17] include special Title IX issue pages. Other major players include the National Women's Law Center, the American Association of University Women, the National Coalition for Girls and Women in Education, and the Melpomene Institute. Smaller, more specialized associations such as the National Women's Martial Arts Federation and the Women's Basketball Coaches' Association also explicitly align themselves with the larger movement for women's sports.

16 http://www.now.org/issues/title_ix/index.html
17 http://www.feminist.org/sports/index.asp

Actors in any social movement draw upon existing social networks in the processes of mobilization. At the same time, new participation builds new social networks and new opportunities for mobilization. Team sports in particular have traditionally been off-limits to women, and not coincidentally team sports are especially useful for building networks. And in fact, to the extent that women relate to one another in ways that men traditionally don't, women's participation in team sports truly creates something new – a new kind of network, a new kind of opportunity, a new kind of identity.

Athletes' own accounts of their motivations support the evidence that participation rates are a measure of the movement's strength. Some of these narratives have recently been compiled into essay collections dedicated to expression feminist views on sport (such as *Girljock* and *Whatever It Takes*). Feminist and solidarity frames are apparent in the language of some of these narratives: "[a women's baseball team] was something that attracted me, that I could imagine myself into" (Sandoz and Winans 1999:5); "the thing I loved . . . was being with a group of Amazon women doing something new to all of us together" (Roxxie 2000:31); "A woman. A fighter" (Sandoz and Winans 1999:21). *Sportswoman* magazine, the first to tie feminism and sports together explicitly, was introduced in 1973. It directly addressed issues such as pay equity and Title IX. The following year, *womanSports* was started by tennis star Billie Jean King and her husband Larry King. This magazine was modeled on *Sports Illustrated*. In contrast to *Sportswoman*, it was structured as a women's magazine first and a sports magazine second. Despite their different approaches, both publications treated athleticism

as a collective identity trait (Creedon 1994:118-126).

**Collective action frames**

Let us return to the question of whether the movement for women's sports "counts" as a social movement in political process theory. The effort for increasing women's acceptance in sport is based on underlying social networks and it is successfully maintaining a sustained challenge to a powerful male-dominated system. But the extent to which it is based in collective action frames may be another question. It depends which aspect of the movement we are examining.

My data show that for many female athletes sport is indeed about collective action. But others shy away from strong feminist ideology and prefer to see their fight as determination to establish their own individual opportunities. Of the 47 women I interviewed, fewer than five seemed uninterested in feminist collective action. one of them, Janet, is a high school gym teacher. She didn't address wider social contexts of any part of her life, rugby or otherwise. For example, when I asked her whether Title IX had meaning for her, her response was about its effects on her own sports opportunities directly. Unlike many other players – who gave answers about particular generations that came before or after themselves, about female athletes in general, and about women's lives beyond sports – Janet didn't acknowledge the structural effects of the law.

If we use Della Porta and Diani's criteria for social movement status, this movement just barely fulfills the definition. They specify that a social movement involves (1) informal interaction networks, (2) shared beliefs and solidarity, (3) collective action focusing on conflicts, and (4) use of protest (Della Porta 1999:14-16, 391). Certainly the

informal interaction networks and the shared beliefs and solidarity are present. And female athletes have engaged in some traditional forms of protest, as when the national women's soccer team declared a strike for wage parity. And again I argue that for many women participation in team sports is itself a form of protest. But the collective action aspect does not extend to all female athletes. To use an infamous advertising line, many of them are "just do(ing) it". Their actions are undoubtedly a form of resistance, and they undoubtedly do have a shared sense of purpose with other female athletes. But their action itself is prior to its political context. It is, for some women, primarily a matter of individual interest and individual identity.

Does the presence of some women who are not interested in collective action negate the efforts of others who are? Since sports are a recreational activity in addition to (as I claim) a potential space for contention, does it matter whether the collectively inclined players are in the majority? Can we even measure that balance when it's clear that each of these women has many reasons for participating in contact sports, and that certain reasons become salient in certain situations? It might look like it's about recreation – and of course that is part of the story.

**Social movement parameters**

In *Contentious Politics* (2007), Tilly and Tarrow explain that a social movement possesses all of the qualities that describe contentious politics, and also include:

*(1) sustained campaigns of claim making; (2) an array of public*

> *performances including marches, rallies, demonstrations, creation of specialized associations, public meetings, public statements, petitions, letter writing, and lobbying; (3) repeated public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment by such means as wearing colors, marching in disciplined ranks, sporting badges that advertise the cause, displaying signs, chanting slogans, and picketing public buildings.*

Social movements also depend on something Tilly and Tarrow call movement bases, but we will leave that aside for the moment.

***Claimsmaking***

The women in my sample are certainly engaged in the first of these three tasks. Teams and leagues, as we saw in Chapter Two, are carefully organized associations that persist over time. What claims do they advance? To answer that question we will look at athletics, gender, and power taken together.

Gendered bodies and gendered selves are constructed through sport practices. At the same time, access to one's own body is a contested resource and the current organization of sport is a mechanism for restricting women's possession of that resource. These are really two aspects of the same process — classification and status assignment happen simultaneously. In this way the social organization of sport operates similarly to the social organization of the labor market: while resources are carefully distributed according to gender, the fact of possession or non-possession of those same resources meanwhile comes to define gender difference.

Let us begin with the first of those two claims: sport is an important site for constructing identity. This is true even for those individuals who are not inclined to work out regularly or watch Monday night football. One reason that sport matters is that the symbols of organized sport practices and physical strength are among the most widely used and easily identifiable symbols of masculinity. For example, it is customary to dress infant boys in clothes printed with baseballs and footballs long before they are able to understand the concept of a game, let alone the concept of gender. Because they are a core aspect of dominant images of masculinity, these symbols impact everyone who is a part of our culture. Another reason that sport matters is that physical activity and the character traits that sport requires are both significant parts of the process by which our bodies and identities are shaped. Men and women end up with different bodies to a large degree because of social practices that begin as soon as they are able to move around.

Secondly, sport is a valuable resource — one that it is systematically restricted for women. Dowling (2000) emphasizes the physical production of gender. She shows that including sport and strength in the process of gender construction serves to regulate individuals' access to their bodies. Dowling's argument is that many of the physical characteristics that we consider to be naturally attached to gender are actually socially constructed. She suggests that girls are so effectively socialized that they begin to self-socialize their bodies. They are trained from a young age to be weak, and so they start training themselves to be weak, and eventually they believe that they are born weak.

Dowling argues that "gender bias actually affects girls' motor development" (54). She cites research showing that parents give both more positive feedback and more

negative feedback to girls, while they leave boys to play independently; parents encourage boy toddlers to climb over obstacles, while they intervene and lift girl toddlers over them; and parents praise boys for physical activity while they chastise girls for it. Overall, parents and teachers encourage more gross motor activity from boys than from girls. Thus, while it is true that girls' gross motor skills are systematically underestimated (thereby making girls susceptible to stereotype threat regarding physical tasks), it is also the case that girls' gross motor skills are significantly underdeveloped. Also important is Dowling's discussion of the problem of adolescent girls ceasing to rely on their active bodies for power and starting to derive power from appearance instead (57). According to Dowling, they do this through cultivating a narrow and harmless sense of their bodies.

Theberge, in her study of a Canadian women's rugby team (2000) documents players' descriptions of physicality and gender through discussions of "checking" (body-slamming other players), a practice which is now prohibited in women's hockey but still allowed in men's hockey. The responses Theberge received from players suggested that players believed gender difference in hockey to be mostly a matter of learning how to use the body. While many of the women I spoke to spoke of their physical talents as a gift (this came particularly from the younger players and the most accomplished international-level athletes in the sample), many instead described a process of discovery.

They seemed to see this transformation – from evaluating their bodies in terms of appearances to evaluating their bodies in terms of their capacity for action – as a major source of personal empowerment. One player, Felicia, described learning to "own her hugeness." She described looking in the mirror as an adult and saying, "gosh . . . this is a

great body!" For these players, building physical confidence in women actually seemed possible. They talked about trying to make it happen around them. "I hope [my daughter] gets it a lot earlier, because I think that will change her life . . . it helped me in every other aspect of my life once I found it." Athletic ability is not a purely natural quality. First, it is not purely physical. Second, the physical parts of it can be understood to be largely socially constructed.

Now that these women have experienced access to this resource first-hand, they are prepared to fight for it. This is classic claimsmaking, no different from the formalized movements typically detailed in the PPT literature.

***Public performances and public displays***

The second of Tilly and Tarrow's three parameters is "an array of public performances including marches, rallies, demonstrations, creation of specialized associations, public meetings, public statements, petitions, letter writing, and lobbying". Rugby is most definitely a site for public performance. It is not only a performance, and it is not only public – but neither are the performances typically associated with formal social movements. The third parameter Tilly and Tarrow specify is "repeated public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment by such means as wearing colors, marching in disciplined ranks, sporting badges that advertise the cause, displaying signs, chanting slogans, and picketing public buildings." Social movements also depend on something Tilly and Tarrow call movement bases, but we will leave that aside for the moment. Again, consistent bonding behavior of this type is a key part of rugby culture.

I could simply go on to argue that my players are indeed doing these things. But

that argument would not be complete: at this point we begin to see private sphere and public sphere distinctions begin to fall apart. Tilly and Tarrow certainly assume public performance to be clearly distinguishable from private activity. Let's investigate what happens if we assume for a moment (erroneously, I contend) that rugby is a purely private space. It's possible to think of it this way, since it's a closely bonded in-group with its own norms and traditions. Rugby is, after all, a club sport. It's a form of leisure. If we see it as entirely private, does it still matter to the social structures outside of it? In other words, does it need to be purely public in order to "count" in our studies of social change?

Rugby culture is a transgressive space, a space that Mansbridge might call an oppositional culture (Mansbridge and Morris 2001) or Ward might call a pre-movement artistic space similar in function to the black-oriented music scene of the 1950s (1998). Both cultures are spaces that cultivate a shared feeling of challenge to the cultural establishment. Mansbridge and Ward, in different ways, suggest that these spaces set the stage for the later development of full-blown social movements.

In their study of lesbian feminist communities, Taylor and Whittier explain that such communities "sustain a collective identity that encourages women to engage in a wide range of social and political actions that challenge the dominant system." This description fits rugby perfectly. Taylor and Whittier classify these communities as abeyance structures, which provide a sort of holding pen for committed political actors in times when formal movements have waned. The women in these communities are in effect waiting for an upswing in formal movement activity. If the movement is revived,

their resources will be readily available. Similarly, Kriesi (1996:153) suggests that former social movement organizations can become involuted, meaning that they lose their political intentions and instead begin to direct their resources toward the interests of the current participants. His example is the transformation of communes into sites for personal and religious development after the 1960s . Like Taylor and Whittier's social movement communities, Kriesi's involution can keep social movement participants connected and available for future mobilization. Involution can "keep the flame of activism alive to fight another day" (Tilly and Tarrow 2007:130).

Rugby may work this way. The birth of the sport in this country did coincide with the rise of mass women's movement and it is possible that formal political organizers could harness the organizational strength of rugby teams and leagues to their advantage. But treating a "social movement community" (Taylor and Whittier's term) as a passive auxiliary to a formal movement campaign is dismissive of the work the women on these teams have already taken upon themselves.

If Tilly and Tarrow were to assess the phenomenon of women's rugby, they would almost certainly categorize it as a social movement base:

> *A social movement base consists of social movement organizations, networks, participants, and the accumulated cultural artifacts, memories, and traditions that contribute to social movement campaigns.*
>
> *A social movement campaign is a sustained challenge to power holders*

*in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of concerted public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment, using such means as public meetings, demonstrations, petitions, and press releases.*

*While movement bases tell us when a social movements is possible, a movement campaign is claim making in motion.*

*(Tilly and Tarrow 2007:114)*

The assumption here is that campaigns are what really get things accomplished. Tilly and Tarrow repeatedly explain that the presence of a campaign divides successful social movements from unsuccessful episodes of collective action.

But does this need to be true? The athletes in my sample do not believe that a formal campaign is a a better mechanism for getting things done than their informal action oriented (and performance-oriented) involvement in transgressive sports. They are disenchanted with formal politics, which they perceive as ineffective because of its reliance on the very rhetorical tools that Tilly and Tarrow say are the signals of self-conscious political determination: marches, press releases, petitions. In interviews these athletes repeatedly framed their own acknowlegements of inequality with hopes that their detractors would come to see them play, as though the fact of witnessing action (again, performance) was far more powerful than language could ever be. All of these scholars – Mansbridge, Ward, PPT, Taylor and Whitter, and Kriesi – devise frameworks that

describe politics too narrowly. Expanding the definition will solve the problem.

Although I'm clearly arguing that rugby is for many women a form of political protest, the players would not quite use those words. They certainly would not all employ the word feminist. Consider these field notes from my interview with Felicia:

> *Clearly, Felicia was conflicted about some parts of self-presentation. She was very interested in being interviewed but wanted me to think that she wasn't. But what caught my interest was her conflicted relationship to feminism. She started out by distancing herself from women's movements. When I asked general questions about women, she answered by talking about her body and her own process of finding physical confidence. Said that women tended not to know their own physical strength and described wanting her daughter "to tap into that being a woman, and being strong." The language Felicia used to discuss gender was centered on confidence. She did not want to be identified as a feminist (she actually qualified a statement by saying "I don't want to make it, like, a feminist comment, but –"). She did, however, want to talk about the fact that women tend to have a lack of confidence and a lack of knowledge of their own physical power. Talked about her own experience of being the tallest kid in the class, and later of starting to "own my hugeness" through rugby. Said that women lacked it and that it was important to help more women find it early on in their lives.*

As I reiterated at the head of this chapter, I argue that politics ought to be defined more broadly than Tarrow, Tilly, and McAdam have been willing to allow. If, as Tilly and Tarrow claim, politics is not present unless a government is involved, then political actors are those who work on behalf of governments or against those governments. Identities are not political identities until they are aligned with or against states. But for women especially, the personal and the political (the private and the public) effectively cannot be separated. When we recognize that politics includes all structural power relationships, including and especially gender, we see that political process theory does actually describe the rugby phenomenon. These rugby players want their actions to bring about social change. Like Felicia, most of them prefer not to call their work politics or feminism. They do see themselves as waging a conscious and sustained campaign, but the object of their claim is not policy. It is gender identity.

**Scale shift**

Tarrow and Tilly describe scale shift as a diffusion process that not only disseminates information but also creates opportunities for collective action at a new level of analysis (2007:94). Do we see scale shift in the case of women's rugby?

There is some evidence that women's rugby is a case of downward scale shift. This is what Mansbridge and Flaster describe in their study of women who frame their own relationships in terms borrowed from formal feminist movements. (For a more thorough explanation of their study, see Chapter One.) A larger political context sets the

scene for individual-level meaning-making. These rugby players may be internalizing and negotiating the consequences of more widespread women's movements.

In all likelihood many of these athletes would still be devoting their energies to rugby no matter the political climate. The particular cultural structure that places access to physical power squarely in the masculine domain gives rugby a particular salience that it might not have in another time and place, but combating inequality is not the only reason these players find themselves returning to practice again and again on muddy nights. They enjoy the sport, they enjoy one another, and many of them are very successful on the field.

These players would hope for upward scale shift: that is, they'd like to see their newly defined gender categories become widely adopted. They would like to see society reorganized along new axes that more closely meet their conceptions of freedom. This dissertation doesn't leave space for us to confirm or deny those effects, but I can say confidently that it's what most of the players in my study would hope for. However, as we saw in Chapter Three, they believe that their best hope for upward scale shift is their behavior, not their language.

Yes, it may be that individual women's experiences are channels for diffusion. But the absences of leaders and formalized language mean that their message – which they prefer to act out rather than proclaim – won't take hold in quite the same way that, say, pro-choice messages were adopted by American progressives in the 2012 presidential election. At the same time, gender identity norms may be changing and it's possible that some degree of cognitive shift is caused by some people making a choice to behave in a

new way, as these rugby players are doing, and other people adjusting to the new behavior by integrating it into interactional gender processes.

### 5.2 Troubling the personal/public divide

As we saw in Chapter Three, rugby players say that rugby is about being real, being yourself. Yet it's also about performance.

Rupp and Taylor's study of drag queens (2003) can help us here. If rugby is to women's resistance to gender prescriptions as drag is to men's resistance against gender prescriptions, female rugby players are reaching across into roles and symbols traditionally reserved for men. Ruppand Taylor's drag queens are men who venture into display, frills, decoration of the body, sexual availability, and exaggerated emotional expression. They reach across gender boundaries to take these things for themselves. We can understand women's contact sports as the same process in negative relief. Instead of frills and coquetry, the female rugby players reach across to take groundedness, rationality, trustworthiness, and physical strength. Taking on masculinity means being taken seriously. It means "walking the walk, not just talking the talk" (Laila).

Performance, in one sense, is inherently feminine. Women decorate and appear. Men do.

This configuration of traits and rebellions makes it easy for us to see drag queens' performances as public acts. Drag clubs are often frequented by straight patrons. That makes it possible for Rupp and Taylor to note that drag "should be understood not only as a commercial performance but as a political event in which identity is used to

contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality" (Rupp and Taylor 2003:2).

Rugby players, on the other hand, say they are not performing. They say they are being real, stripping away edifice and revealing each individual's and each team unit's actual strength, power, tenacity, and ultimately worth. They say that you can't hide during a game. Either you've prepared or you haven't. Either you are willing to put it all on the line or you aren't.

But of course we can also see that sport itself is a performance. A rugby game, like any other organized athletic competition, is a public display. Great importance is given to uniforms. Sportsmanship and chivalry matter. Spectators gather on the side of the field. Games are often videotaped. Professional games are shown in pubs or broadcast on cable television. These players know they are being watched. They care that they are being watched. Professional male athletes have a notorious reputation (deserved or not) for being flaky and unreliable, for barely making it through their academic courses, for spending their time and money on a display of wealth and temporary success. Still, we all live with a feeling way down deep that the elaborate arena, staged though it is, ultimately is a space for each worthy man to prove himself. The arena is thickly decorated with ritual but each man facing off inside it is naked. It's an age-old moment. We can see what he is really made of, who he really is.

This contradiction is not lost in rugby. It's a space in which being real matters . . . and in which display matters too. For whom do they perform? The intended audience includes other athletes, themselves, non-rugby friends visiting the space, people who don't know women can play, and young girls for whom they want to create opportunities.

The players I interviewed would not identify as performers at all. Their interactions involve a great deal of Goffman-style posturing, taking on a language and role that itself has a contentious meaning. But part of the athletic identity is centered precisely on doing, not seeming. Despite the public presentation of the sport, in the common view of these women, performance is off-limits.

One example of the elaborate performative traditions that have developed in the rugby community is an informal annual summer sevens tournament. Sevens is a less structured form of the game that is sometimes played recreationally in the off-season, something like touch football. Groups of friends get together to enter the tournament independently of their teams. Every summer one particular team enters and registers itself as the "Pink Dresses". The players wear – you guessed it – pink prom dresses over their rugby gear. The dresses are actual formal gowns that have been retired from the wardrobes of teammates and family members. Much hilarity follows as the players run and score (and often win the tournament) in these dresses, which inevitably get tangled, torn, and sometimes ripped off the players entirely, revealing their usual heavy-duty rugby jerseys and shorts underneath.

Kutz-Flamenbaum (2007) analyzes a similar but more self-consciously political performance, the anti-war demonstrations staged by Code Pink. Code Pink members wear exaggeratedly feminine clothing and jewelry. They present themselves as a seemingly harmless cheerleading squad or dance drill team, then use the cheer or dance performance to convey a strong outspoken political message. Their political force comes from irony. By combining a strong outspoken message with overdone femininity, Code

Pink demonstrators give themselves more legitimacy. They start out as (passive) girls, whom we generally don't take seriously. Then by demonstrating (active) masculine behavior, they establish some legitimacy. It is just the opposite with the Pink Dresses. In the case of the Pink Dresses, women who normally do identify with each other through stereotypically unfeminine behavior take on extra-feminine behavior for show. It's clear in the end that the pink dresses come off – they are the joke – and the athleticism stays. The team's authentic identity shines through and the team takes the trophy home. The pink dresses emphasize the reality of the athleticism, and also make the strong, active, un-feminized female bodies seem closer to normal next to the deliberately ridiculous prom dresses). The Pink Dresses begin from a position of legitimacy and ultimately refuse to give it up. They exaggerate the feminine, then they distance themselves from it.

This performance becomes even more interesting when we compare the costumed sevens games to the in-season team formal dinners that players sometimes attend. Many of the most athletic women, including some of the Pink Dresses, enjoy wearing feminine cocktail dresses without irony on occasion. Although they are more physically fit than the average fashion model, they succeed in appearing soft, glamorous, and feminine. Both the Pink Dresses tournament showing and the formal dinner are performances. The messages they send about who these women are, however, are very different. Where a black-tie formal event is a ritual social practice that supports wider social norms, the Pink Dresses game is a challenge.

Let's look again at these two quotes, the first from Marcie and the second from Felicia:

> *I think it [playing rugby] opens people's eyes up that a woman can be just as physical as a man and still go home and put on her heels and lipstick and be a woman. And I think it carries over into the workforce. We can put on our lab coats and be a scientist, or be a physician, or be a nurse, or do whatever.*

> *People are like, women play rugby? Yeah. And they do a lot of other things too. Guess what, open your mind, it's not just about this one thing. Which is good . . . for them to be surprised. Women play rugby, maybe they do other stuff that I hadn't thought about.*

It is significant that both of these women (along with many others I spoke to during initial interviews) refer to the experience of being observed. They expect others to witness their athletic "performance". This supports the comparison between women's rugby and drag shows (Rupp and Taylor 2003) mentioned in the previous section: besides being passionately-pursued hobbies, both are also specialized forms of social performance. Both rugby players and drag queens expect their behavior to have political consequences.

It has become standard for social movements to carry out part of their

performative functions through the media. One aspect of women's sports that stands out from the usual pattern of a social movement is its media treatment.

### 5.3 Interrupting interactional-level gender processes

#### Media framing

Some of the available frames come from within the movement, as when Title IX and the words “women in sports” show up on the Feminist Majority website. The language of rights and equality have been used, along with empowerment and strength. Some of the frames also come through the media, and the particular way that those frames develop in this case is very interesting.

The relationship of the women’s sports movement to the media is complicated. It is not surprising for media messages to be unsupportive of a change to the prevailing gender system. Tarrow writes that, “while the media may not work directly for the ruling class, they certainly do not work for social movements” (1998:116). Despite the growth in participation, associations, favorable legislation, and professional teams, media images of female athletes continue to be at odds with the movement. As Kane and Greendorfer note, “the media reflect who and what has value and prestige in our culture” (1994:34). If there are fewer visible images of women in sport, it signals to us that they must be less important. But media framing of this movement goes a step beyond the simple omission of female athletes.

General media coverage of female athletes tends to be contradictory: images of strength are often undermined by images of weakness. On one hand, women are being

taken seriously as athletes. It is not rare to see images of female runners, mountain climbers, or surfers in magazine advertisements. On the other hand, these images are often framed in terms of gender roles. Expressions of women's strength and power are accompanied by assertions of their emotionality and dependence.

One way in which female athletes are often trivialized in media coverage is through over-familiar language. According to Messner's analysis (1990) of tennis commentary, announcers called women by their first names 52.7 percent of the time, while they called men by their first names only 7.8 percent of the time. Another pattern is an emphasis on passivity, as opposed to action or aggression. In a 1990 study of televised sports coverage, "men were framed as active subjects whereas women were framed as reactive objects." Description of men often uses war metaphors or other power language. Description of women often redirects interest away from athleticism toward attractiveness or feminine traits (Bernstein 2002:420).

Extra press attention is systematically given to athletes who take on culturally acceptable roles. Women who engage in sex-appropriate sports – that is, individual sports (like gymnastics), sports involving a barrier between players (like tennis and volleyball), and sports that emphasis grace (like figure skating and diving) – tend to get more coverage (Kane and Greendorfer 1994:40). Similarly, models Gabrielle Reece, Lisa Leslie, and the notorious Anna Kournikova (pro volleyball, basketball, and tennis players, respectively) are covered disproportionately, even though their teammates' athletic achievements are just as impressive. In discussing magazine images of Florence Griffith Joyner that did not depict her in motion, but did tend to focus on her long painted

fingernails, Kane and Greendorfer note that “Joyner’s presence on the covers acknowledges that social change has taken place; yet the specific type of portrayal indicates a resistance to fundamental social change because she is primarily linked to her 'appropriate' role as female, not athlete” (1994:33).

The same can be said of those athletes in obvious heterosexual relationships, such as prominent soccer players Julie Foudy and Mia Hamm. Wright and Clarke, in their analysis of articles written about women’s rugby, found that “the women who either had demonstrable heterosexual relationships or who fitted conventional heterosexual notions of attractiveness received the most coverage and that the descriptors were predominantly devoted to these attributes” (Wright and Clarke 1999:238). It is interesting to note that not all expressions of women’s heterosexuality necessarily contradict the power, focus, and achievement that athleticism represents. However, it is significant that there are many more portrayals of women off the court, in street clothes, and in sexy poses than there are men (Wright and Clarke 1998:228; Kane and Parks 1992). Sexualized images often do have the effect of turning women who are active subjects (the athlete, male or female, is the ultimate representation of subjectivity) into more passive objects to be enjoyed or consumed.

We can look to coverage of soccer for an example of the strong/weak contradiction. Overall, soccer has grown more than any other intercollegiate sport for women since 1977 (the year Title IX was first enforced). In 1977, it was only offered by 2.8 percent of colleges and universities, and in 2004 that number has risen to 88.6 percent (Acosta 2004:6). While the long-standing US men’s national team does not hold an

impressive record, the women's team has quickly proven itself. The US national women's team took gold medals in their first appearance at the Olympics in 1996. Three years later, the team won the first women's World Cup. Both events were covered extensively in the press.

As Sandoz shows, both *Newsweek* and *Sports Illustrated* treated the US Women's Soccer Team win of the 1999 World Cup as a major story, but both publications used clearly contradictory frames in their coverage (2000). *Newsweek*'s main frame was the slogan "Girls Rule." This is problematic for several reasons: first, while it highlights the victory of the event, it undermines the strength of the players by calling them girls. Second, as Sandoz notes, the slogan itself has its origins in fashion and in suburban children's soccer. Third, declaring that "girls rule" places these athletes in opposition to men. It suggests that their main reason for playing soccer is to displace male athletes. In fact these women are playing for many reasons, one of which is passion for the game itself. This framing is completely consistent with a wider gender system in which a woman's actions and achievements are routinely understood in terms of accepting or rejecting gender roles, while meaning is giving to a man's actions without specific reference to gender.

Six months after *Newsweek* featured the World Cup win on its cover, *Sports Illustrated* chose the team as its 1999 athlete of the year. Again, the very fact that *Sports Illustrated*, which dedicated 91 percent of its feature space to men between 1954 and 1987 (Kane and Greendorfer 1984:35), chose to honor a group of women in that way was remarkable. However, the language and content of the coverage again undercuts the

strength and achievement of the athletes. The magazine began its caption with the words "Thank Heaven for Little Girls" and ran baby photos of the players (Sandoz 2000).

**An alternative model**

Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999) provide a clear three-stage explanation for interactional-level gender processes. First, people generally perceive gender as a socially significant means of categorization. Second, studies show that men and women who have equal status actually behave similarly. Third, however, when men and women interact in mixed groups they usually don't have the same status. Their gender places them into unequal status groups. The result is that differences in behavior are perceived as gender-based differences, when in fact they are often status effects. The more we draw conclusions about people based on gender, the more important people think it is. Like so many institutional processes, this is a cyclical series of events.

The media messages detailed in the previous subsection are one key mechanism by which gender is recreated at the interactional level. On one hand, interactional-level processes are powerful because they are invisible. In fact, one difficulty about theorizing gender — or any institution — is that the reflexive nature of institutional processes can make efforts to reveal them seem tautological. There isn't a clearly formalized authority charged with enforcing gender norms; yet those norms are enforced quite effectively. The tendency of social institutions to take on their own authority makes their structure hard to document and measure. On the other hand, however, the interactional level holds the most promise for change (Ridgeway and Correll 2000).

Significantly, rugby has the potential to interrupt interactional-level processes. It disrupts the function of the institution simply by providing an alternate model of what who women are and what they are capable of. Players do this both on and off the field. Women's rugby, the new identities it makes possible, and the relationships these women share all interrupt interactional gender processes.

**Free agents**

It is my contention, so to speak, that "politics" must be defined more broadly than Tarrow, Tilly, and McAdam have been willing to allow. If we extend the concept of politics to cover all collective power dynamics, including and especially gender, we see that the political process theory does actually describe the rugby phenomenon. These women are fighting to open up the gender system. They strive to widen the category of legitimate gender identities. They say they don't want to talk about politics, yet do want to upset the balance of power.

The reason they don't want to talk about politics is that they see traditional formalized politics as "just talk" and they'd rather be taking action. This stance is itself framed by gender, as players perceive talking as typically feminine and low-status, while they see action as higher status. Interestingly, it is their precisely their preference for action over language that makes Tarrow and Tilly think that rugby players are not engaged in the most critical phase of a social movement. Tarrow and Tilly would classify rugby as part of a social movement base (which is a structural condition) rather than a social movement campaign (which, according to PPT, is where things get accomplished).

These women, even the ones who are very individually-oriented, are not free riders. Nor are they simple receptacles for language trickling out of formal movement rhetoric. They are actively working to throw a wrench into the constraints of the gender system. Think of them more as free agents, who consciously model new behavior for others not involved in formal movements.

## CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

I have argued here that women's rugby is part of a social movement. Proponents of this movement want gender equality in sports and in life. More to the point, they want to lift the constraints of currently available gender identities.

The majority of these women choose not to call rugby a feminist act, although many of them do call themselves feminists, because they understand feminism as political and rugby as private. However, a closer look shows us that these women understand rugby to be part of a conscious and sustained campaign to challenge existing gender identity. The line between personal space and public space that at first seems clear is actually quite indistinct. Through rugby, these individuals press a claim that women deserve access to their own bodies. They question fundamental structures of power and gender identity.

I have also argued that the performative aspects of the sport give women's rugby the potential to interrupt institutional gender processes at the interactional level.

### 6.1 Performing and occupying space

In my original assessment of the overall sample (in Chapter Two) I wrote that these women don't mind taking up space. This initial comment came from my own observations during the interview stage. The repeated experience of sitting across from women who allowed themselves to occupy physical space made a clear impression on me.

*I went to college and I found girls [on the rugby team] who were just*

*like me. They would love to sit down and have a massive burrito, a big beer, and then burp and poke fun at the guys walking down the street. I just found similar, stronger women and assertive women. (Roxanne)*

Taking up space is a core part of their experience. Some interviewees indicated that this tendency was a character trait, likely the very trait that brought them to the rugby field in the first place. Others explained that they made a point of cultivating this quality in themselves.

Several of my own most meaningful rugby memories involve taking up public space: showing up for a tournament en masse and owning a small-town bar for the night, occupying every room in a hotel wing, making other airline passengers wait when half of the team was on a delayed connecting flight. In these moments strong-willed individuals gathered together and formed a community that became disruptive. This was possible because of rugby players' willingness to occupy space. Is this a contradiction – are these are public sphere events? Is there an important public sphere component to rugby performance? These are all actually private sphere events. They involve taking up space in other people's private spheres, not moving the show to a public stage. But then what's a public stage? Is it government? Mass media? Some particular kind of discourse or scale of participation? Here again we see that the distinction is arbitrary.

Taking up space is thematically related to performance. The word "performance" carries two meanings in this discussion. (1) It can refer to the public enactment of identity that Rupp and Taylor's drag queens engage in. In this way, these players are performers.

They present themselves on a field/stage in a uniform/costume in front of spectators/audiences. This is how they interrupt interactional-level gender processes. (2) It can also refer to the feminized non-agentic behavior that I have called "appearing" (in contrast to being/doing). I've taken pains to use separate terms for these two concepts, but in fact they are related. I say over and over that my players don't mind taking up space – this is part of what signals that they're being and not appearing, doing and not performing, strong and not weak. These women are committed to performance of the first type even while they are careful to avoid performance of the second type.

However, isn't formal protest a way of taking up space? So they do want to take up one kind of space (decisive action on the field and in careers and in use of their own bodies) but not another (organizing in the public sphere).

The rugby players in this study choose to take up space and act decisively in the private sphere. And yet they choose to avoid taking up space in the public sphere. Why is this? It is because they don't trust that they can effect change in the public sphere, and ineffective public-sphere action quickly becomes branded as feminine. My players opt not to participate in formal protest because they find it too intrusive, too shrill. Masculine sound is "loud", feminine sound is "shrill". Part of shrillness is ineffectiveness. Even as they work to dismantle artificial boundaries of gender categories, they must harness those same structural-level categories in order to experience individual-level power.

Given a choice, which they are indeed given over and over (Play rugby? Cut hair? Wear delicate clothes? Act physically weak? Act indecisive? Take up physical space? Wear comfortable shoes? Accept comments from outsiders about toughness,

manliness, brutality?), they try to mix up their answers – but they also fight to maintain individual-level power. So they sometimes manage to create a space for themselves in between separative/soluble, and they sometimes give up and act apologetically (accepting feminine/soluble), and they sometimes choose the more powerful option (accepting masculine/separative).

The act of choosing between being and appearing – in the language of these players, choosing between real and prissy – reifies the separative self at the structural level. But what's a girl to do, if individual-level punishment waits for those who occupy the space between categories? Their struggle with an unrealistically binary system in this way is one more iteration of the separative self/soluble self illusion that underlies this project. These women are frustrated because they don't want to choose one category over the other.

## 6.2 Directions for future research

This dissertation contributes to the explanatory value of political process theory, but it is not a political process analysis of women's rugby. The value in my analysis lies in what participants make of their larger social context. This dissertation is focused at the level of collective meaning-making in the context of larger social and political conditions – in other words, the relationship between politics and everyday decisions.

The next stage of this work is an application of political process analysis to women's rugby and other forms of informal protest. In this section I will offer several directions this research could take.

**Women's rugby**

Continuing this investigation of women's rugby would include examining patterns of formal political action among players; tracing strategic repertoires and frames as they are shared between this movement and others like it; analyzing the historical conditions under which major milestones have been reached (for example, the first female referee of a men's international match) in order to describe shifts in political opportunity structure; and tracking the effectiveness of particular performance tactics.

The theoretical challenge behind this dissertation also begs the question of whether applying a traditional PPT approach to women's rugby and similar cases of informal, everyday protest is sufficient given the murkiness of the public/private divide. Is it time to develop an approach to studying social movements that is less predicated on the public/private divide? One such approach might consider the possibility of leaderless movements. Another would acknowledge more explicitly that participants have many reasons to join a movement – some individual-level motivations and some structural-level collective motivations. Personal meaning does not preclude political commitment.

Of course, the clearest line of follow-up research would be measurement of the impact of this movement. Since I've claimed that rugby has the potential to interrupt stereotypes and cognitive frames regarding gender, it seems appropriate to design social psychology experiments to see whether and how the presence of women on the pitch changes people's minds about who women are and can be. How direct are these effects? Do girls really walk past the field and imagine themselves in gender-atypical careers? To paraphrase player Marta, do they really think, "Look, women tackling! I can be a scientist

if I want to!"? I'd also be interested in studying men's rugby — not as direct parallel to this dissertation research, but rather to see whether what Messner calls the "center" of men's sports (2002) is indeed affected by the presence of women in this space.

Another related avenue of research would be an investigation into the potential personal benefits of women's rugby to the women who play. What consequences might rugby participation have on the players themselves? This work would follow McAdam's (1982) and Taylor 's (Taylor et al. 2009) respective studies of the characteristics of former movement participants. It would also follow Poletta's work on democracy and civic engagement (2002). Movement participants certainly believe that sports is a site for individual-level women's empowerment (Blinde, Taub, and Han 1994; Theberge 1987). Documenting such effects could contribute to both the scholarship and the movement itself.

**Beyond contact sports**

Most of the questions in the previous section could fruitfully be asked of any women's contact sport. For example, I would expect a study of women's hockey in the United States to yield results consistent with a study of women's rugby. Certainly there is a wealth of cases outside of sports in which women step into spaces from which they have been systematically excluded. Firefighting, law enforcement, and the military are all prime examples, in part because they share a focus on the active masculine physical body. The military is a particularly promising field for this research because of recent legal developments that will likely bring an influx of women in combat roles. Katzenstein

has begun this with her study of women in the military who purposefully challenge the institution from the inside (1998); there is also space for investigations of women in combat roles to track their own motivations for joining the armed forces, and space for studies of how their presence might change cultural mindsets. Longitudinal social psychological experiments testing changes in widely-held gender stereotypes would again be appropriate here.

Are there cases where we might look at men moving into traditionally feminine activities? Yes, certainly. However, there is an important difference between this phenomenon and the subject of my study. Where women who play rugby are moving into a position of power, men moving across that boundary are typically in a position to lose power. Studies of male nurses, male daycare providers, and male housekeepers would all be possible. But in each of those occupations it has seemed that men's entry has either created a glass escalator effect (Williams 1992) or led to increased occupational sex segregation, rather than eroding that segregation (as rugby players would like to do).

This difference makes it promising to examine men moving not just into traditionally feminine roles but specifically into appearance-focused roles. Male fashion models, male cheerleaders, or stay-at-home dads would be good examples. Of course, these opportunities all exist in mixed-sex settings. To make a direct comparison to the case of women's rugby, it would be important to choose a male-only setting such as an all-male modeling agency. This would be similar to Rupp and Taylor's work on drag queens, though not all the drag queens in their study would identify as men offstage. Many of my rugby players push the boundaries of gender identity, but all of them

describe themselves as women.

This dissertation also calls for research into informal protest that does not specifically focus on challenging gender. It adds a new dimension to the study of any group that has chosen to work for structural change through everyday performance in response to exclusion from the public sphere. For example, we might use this approach to examine the collective struggles of African American yacht racers or Latino bankers. In some ways this line of research is a closer fit than the reverse-gender configurations discussed above for the simple reason that collective action has historically been an effective tool for those who do not enjoy institutional privilege.

### 6.3 Leaderless institutions, leaderless movements

One of the great difficulties in thinking clearly about rugby, gender, and social movements is the apparent absence of leaders. Can a movement be leaderless? Can a contested authority be leaderless? My answer is yes. While gender sets clear and fundamental rules for behavior and identity, there is no president or even formal spokesperson for gender. It is perhaps the most decentralized regime in history. Its institutional power comes from this fact. As we saw in Chapter Four, gender norms are enforced in complex ways at three interconnected levels from inside the institution. But it ultimately creates the illusion that following its institutional patterns is a matter of individual choice. This makes it a much more difficult regime to track than, say, Kim Jong Un and his team of advisers. Seeing the contested authority here as leaderless may

help us to see how a movement might also be leaderless and yet still deliberate.[18] Rather than seeking power or material resources, these players seek a change in the structure of available gender identities. This distinction, although it is certainly important, should not preclude these women from being recognized as notable agents of social change.

18 Della Porta and Diani (2009) claim that movements are not organizations, they are networks. Meanwhile Zald (2000) calls them "ideologically structured action". Both of these ideas may be compatible with leaderless movements.

## APPENDIX ONE

**Table 5: Player list**

| Team pseudonym | Player pseudonym | Interview location | Age group | Profession | Level of play | Stated sexual identity (if volunteered) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ravens | Bridget | on field, during game | late 20s | graduate student | elite | LGBT |
| Ravens | Tracy | at pub, postgame | 30s | legal assistant | international competition | – |
| Ravens | LD | at pub, postgame | late 20s | law student | serious amateur | – |
| Ravens | Jodi | at pub, postgame | 40s and up | small business owner | elite | LGBT |
| Ravens | Tyler | at pub, postgame | 40s and up | gym teacher | international competition | – |
| Scorpions | Robyn | on field, postgame | late 20s | corporate consultant | international competition | straight |
| Scorpions | Petra | in coffee shop | 30s | teacher | international competition | LGBT |
| Scorpions | Sam | at work | 30s | teacher | international competition | – |
| Scorpions | Sandy | at restaurant over lunch | 30s | airline baggage handler | international competition | straight |
| Scorpions | Alicia | at work | 30s | teacher | elite | – |
| Coyotes | Felicia | at her home | 40s | financial advisor | serious amateur | LGBT |
| Rockets | Angela | at field, during game | early 20s | – | recreational | straight |
| Rockets | Casey | at pub, following game | early 20s | lobbyist | recreational | LGBT |
| Rockets | Dawn | at pub, following game | early 20s | graduate student | recreational | – |
| Rockets | Nora | at restaurant, over lunch | late 20s | graduate student | recreational | LGBT |
| Rockets | Louise | at her home | 40s and up | corporate IT specialist | recreational | LGBT |
| Tornadoes | Reggie | on field, before game | early 20s | office temp | recreational | straight |
| Tornadoes | Gloria | on field, after game | 40s and up | physical therapist | serious amateur | LGBT |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tornadoes | Jenna | on field, after game | early 20s | kindergarten teacher | recreational | straight |
| Tornadoes | Judy | on field, after game | early 20s | – | recreational | straight |
| Kestrels | Becky | at pub, after game | 30s | fitness industry | international competition | LGBT |
| Kestrels | Marina | on field, before game | 30s | – | serious amateur | LGBT |
| Kestrels | Brooke | in coffee shop | 30s | graduate student | elite | LGBT |
| Kestrels | Colette | at field, before practice | 30s | – | elite | LGBT |
| Kestrels | Amy | at home (group interview with Jordan and Erin) | early 20s | waitress | serious amateur | – |
| Kestrels | Jordan | at home (group interview with Amy and Erin) | early 20s | student | international competition | – |
| Kestrels | Sabine | at restaurant, over lunch | 30s | math teacher | elite | – |
| Chargers | Deb | in grocery store coffee shop | 40s and up | IT specialist | international competition | LGBT |
| Chargers | Janet | in coffee shop | 40s and up | gym teacher | international competition | straight |
| Chargers | Joy | at her home | 40s and up | financial advisor | recreational | LGBT |
| Comets | Melinda | at her home | 40s and up | special ed teacher | elite | LGBT |
| Comets | Meg | in grocery store coffee shop | 30s | human services | elite | straight |
| Comets | Mary Ellen | at restaurant, over breakfast | 30s | massage therapist | recreational | straight |
| Comets | Paula | at her home | 40s and up | human services | elite | straight |
| Comets | Deirdre | at her home | 40s and up | lawyer | international competition | LGBT |
| Blaze | Erin | at a friend's home (group interview with Amy and Jordan) | early 20s | unemployed | recreational | – |
| Blaze | Terry | at her home | 40s and up | educational consultant | elite | LGBT |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blaze | Lailah | in coffee shop | early 20s | teachers' assistant | international competition | LGBT |
| Blaze | Kendra | at collegiate rugby clubhouse | 30s | rugby coach | international competition | – |
| Blaze | Roxanne | in coffee shop | early 20s | technology sales | international competition | LGBT |
| Blaze | Maya | at work | early 20s | programmer | serious amateur | – |
| Blaze | Josie | in her home, with partner Abby | 30s | teacher | international competition | LGBT |
| Blaze | Abby | in her home, with partner Josie | 40s | rugby coach | international competition | LGBT |
| Blaze | Alison | in coffee shop | 30s | fitness industry | international competition | LGBT |
| Blaze | Wendy | in coffee shop | 30s | lawyer | recreational | – |
| Blaze | Lynn | at restaurant, over lunch | 40s and up | writer | elite | – |
| Blaze | Shannon | at restaurant, over lunch | early 20s | consultant | serious amateur | – |

## APPENDIX TWO

**Table 6: Interview schedule**

| Month of travel | Geographical location | Number of interviews |
|---|---|---|
| May 2006 | Ithaca, NY (interviews done by phone) | 6 (pilot interviews) |
| October 2006 | New York, NY | 6 |
| October 2006 | Washington DC | 4 |
| October 2006 | Sweet 16 Championship in Kansas City, MO | 6 |
| April 2008 | Boston, MA | 2 |
| May 2008 | Boston, MA | 2 |
| May 2008 | Minneapolis-St.Paul, MN | 9 |
| May 2008 | New York, NY | 4 |
| September 2008 | Washington DC | 2 |
| November 2008 | San Francisco, CA | 12 |

## APPENDIX THREE

**Interview guide (primary study)**

How did you first get involved with rugby?
Why do you continue to play?

When you tell other people (co-workers, students, people you meet at parties) that you play, what does that information tell them about you?
How do people tend to react when they hear that you play?
What are women who play rugby really like?
Is there something different about women who play this sport?

What do you think sports can bring to women's lives?
Do you think that most women and girls have adequate access to sports?
Why do you think it's taken so many years for women to begin playing rugby, football, and hockey?
What does Title IX mean to you?

Off the pitch, away from rugby, have you done other things that are gender-atypical?
In general, how do you tend to approach gender-based barriers?

Do you belong to any women's organizations/groups/networks?
*(if yes)*
Are any of them feminist organizations?
Would you call yourself a feminist?
Have you been involved in any marches, demonstrations, or other organized public protest, on any kind of issue?

Where do you think we are now, as a society, on gender equality?
*(if subject describes continuing inequality)*
Do you think the system is changeable?
What do you see as some of the best ways to try to change it?
Do you personally feel drawn to be involved in any of those efforts?

## APPENDIX FOUR

**Interview guide (pilot study)**

How long have you played?
Did you play other sports first? Other team contact sports?

Why do you play rugby? How did you start?
What do you love about it?
Do you get those things in other parts of your life? Other non-sports parts of your life?
Does your involvement in this sport make your life different off the pitch?

Do you tell other people that you play? Co-workers, students, people you meet at parties?
*(If yes)* Why? What does that information tell them about you?
Have you made a conscious decision that you want rugby to be part of the way your kids understand you?
Has anyone ever told you that girls shouldn't play? Or tried to make you feel bad for being a girl and playing?
In general, would you encourage other women to play?

Your team does a lot of young player development – the tournament, also clinics, provides coaches and refs for college sides. Why do you think your team has consistently put this effort in? What's the motivation?
Does your involvement in this sport indirectly make others' lives different?
Do you think that women and men have different experiences playing rugby?

Do you feel like the Title IX controversy affects you?
Do you see yourself as a feminist? What do you think of that word?
Do you belong to any explicitly feminist organizations/groups/networks?
Do you see your team as a feminist organization?
In your own life, do you see rugby as a feminist act?

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