

A Man's Game?: Women Flaying Rugby Union in Australia

Alison Carle and John Nauright
**Department of Human Movement Studies
The University of Queensland
Brisbane, Australia**

Abstract

Women have had a long history of participation in modern sporting activities though they have faced countless barriers to sporting competition, particularly in 'contact' sports. As we move into the twenty-first century, many more doors are opening for the sporting woman, and games previously thought to 'belong' to men are becoming attractive options for women. One sport that is enjoying increasing popularity amongst women is rugby union. Since the 1970s women have taken up rugby union and significant numbers of women now play the game in the British Isles, Europe, North America and Australasia. Although many may delight in the apparent breakdown of the masculine exclusivity that traditionally has been maintained within rugby, a thorough investigation of the emerging female rugby culture reveals a sporting site that still reinforces and echoes historical, masculine-orientated stereotypes. This case study examines women's rugby culture through an analysis of an Australian rugby club and the culture that surrounds the women's team, as well as the questioning of the culture that emerges around the playing of such a hyper-masculine sport. This will be done in an attempt to understand why women are playing football when they face strong societal opposition based on historical, social and physical perceptions about the relationship of women to contact sports.

In contemporary society, sport is regarded not only as a physical struggle between competitors, but also as a phenomenon that has the potential to define those who play and support sporting activities. Sporting activities are particularly significant in socialising young men into the performance of masculinity and feminists view social categorisation that distinguishes females from males as a major problem that continually creates inequality between the sexes.¹ These patterns perpetuate the existing discrimination and exploitation of women, so that some have described sport as the last true bastion of male domination.² These differences are regularly reinforced with continuing exploitation and discrimination existing in most popular sports. Indeed, 'the determination of males to preserve sport as a male activity and privilege has affected every stage of the development of sport for women'.³

One of the main views shared by feminists is that women have the right to control their bodies and make choices in their own interests, independent of those promoted by men or the state.⁴ It therefore seems ironic that, until recently, the majority of feminist research has ignored female sporting bodies, 'nor have they always seen the relevance of physicality or empowerment

through physical activity, to feminist politics'.⁵ In arguing for placing the body at the centre of feminist analysis and politics, Elizabeth Grosz states that the body has been *the* site of female oppression in society:

Instead of granting women an autonomous and active form of corporeal specificity, at best women's bodies are judged in terms of a 'natural inequality,' as if there was a standard or measure for the value of bodies independent of sex. In other words, women's corporeal specificity is used to explain and justify the different social positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes. By implication, women's bodies are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements, being weaker, more prone to irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictability.⁶

Although female athletes have the opportunity to experience the same aspects of sport that male athletes do (such as the pursuit of a common goal, camaraderie and belonging), the unsettled relationship that exists between gender and sport 'provides a very different context for the experience of community in women's sport'.⁷ Women face the problem of constructing communities in sport that conform to overriding conventions dictated by wider societal constructs, that on the whole, serve to minimise and trivialise their exertions. The recent increase in female athleticism represents a genuine challenge by women to gain equality, self-definition and control of their own bodies to such a degree that it challenges male domination.⁸

This case study of female rugby players answers Ann Hall's call for more 'studies in which women athletes are asked to reflect on the significance of the body and the physicality to their experience of sport'.⁹ Despite the relative lack of material analysing women's experiences as players of contact sports, one study, which examined physical contact in women's basketball, shows how female athletes use the physicality and emotionality of their game as a way of learning about their self-identities through their lived experiences both on and off the court.¹⁰ Nancy Theberge's recent ethnographic study of a Canadian women's ice hockey team supports Genevieve Rail's findings for basketball, in illustrating the contested terrain of gender through the examination of ice hockey, Canada's 'flag carrier of masculinity'.¹¹ The distinct conclusions drawn in these cases illustrate the potential such interactive studies have for broadening our comprehension of the relations between gender and contemporary sport. With a dearth of archival material and secondary literature, it was necessary to conduct interviews and utilise ethnographic methods to uncover the experiences of women rugby players and the problems and prospects women face in 'crossing the line' that formerly excluded them from contact sports such as rugby.

Rugby union became a game played, controlled, promoted and watched by men. Rugby as a historical cultural practice has long reinforced the general notion of men in sport as an overclass that has resulted in men's greater access to opportunities, rewards and power.¹² Few, if any, sports have provided the cultural capital for success in wider society than rugby union and membership in the rugby fraternity. Male rugby has been underpinned by female domestic service and the male rugby culture built on the denigration of women and homosexuals, thus reinforcing a masculinity centred on bodily contact and performance, but one legitimated through the marginalisation of the Other. The relationship between masculinity and rugby was passed generationally between fathers and sons, and rugby participation became synonymous with learning to be a man in the public schools of England and the private schools of the British Empire. Even though the characteristics of climate, immigration, demography and geography led the 'sport-obsessed', colonial Australians to adapt rugby football to some extent, these underlying themes of masculine domination were transferred to the private, and some public, schools in Australia.¹³

Twentieth-century Western boys entered a society with preconceived stereotypical ideals supported by the creed of rugby (or other football codes) and masculinist social values continued to be nurtured by sports such as rugby union and its surrounding administration and culture. Most women have been excluded from football from the outset, as John Bale states, '(t)he preference for football as a toy for boys, but not girls, reflects a form of sex-appropriate behaviour that has led to women being excluded from playing rugby since infancy'.¹⁴ For most of the century and still for most women, their roles in rugby have been restricted to the domestic servicing of men through the washing of rugby clothing, supplying plates of food for club dinners and taking sons and partners to rugby matches amongst other activities. Women were to be present purely in supportive roles. Shona Thompson (1988) describes the domestic positioning of women in rugby union well:

The domestic labour of the women has always served rugby. One is able to cite an endless list of chores traditionally done by women for the benefit of the men and boys who play rugby. It would include providing meals, catering for visiting teams, shopping for, laundering, mending and ironing team uniforms, transporting sons to practices and games, waiting on the sideline, attending to injured bodies and egos.¹⁵

Many New Zealand women used the 1981 South African rugby tour of the country to protest the rugby culture and the way it promoted masculine and misogynist ideals. A group called Women Against Rugby (WAR) was formed and they withdrew domestic servicing of rugby during the tour. Although this was overshadowed by the other political attacks also associated with the tour, it

was an initial step toward breaking down male exclusivity in rugby union in a country where rugby was the major national sport for men.¹⁶ By the 1980s women had already started playing rugby in large numbers in the United States and Canada, where the men's national sports are baseball, basketball, American football and ice hockey. In places where rugby was a major national football code for men, women's rugby was slower to emerge.

Despite the presence of strident criticism and public beliefs in gender specific activities, many women continued to strive for a wider range of sporting opportunities throughout the twentieth century. In 1921, over 200 women met to establish a women's rugby league competition in Sydney, Australia. Women's matches continued into the 1930s with over 2,500 spectators witnessing a charity match in 1930, in aid of Sydney's unemployed women.¹⁷ Rugby league competition soon disappeared as male authorities colluded to keep women off male rugby league grounds. A women's competition in rugby league only re-emerged along with rugby union competitions in Australia in the late 1980s and 1990s though without support from male rugby league organisations.

In addition to growth in women's rugby in North America in the 1980s, the Women's Rugby Football Union was founded in England in 1983 with only twelve member clubs. In the following decade, membership swelled to over 2,000 playing members affiliated with 120 different clubs. Scotland, Ireland and Wales soon followed, setting up their first international teams. This increase in female athleticism represented what Mike Messner generally terms 'a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, and as such represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination'.¹⁸

Although these structural developments suggest that the hostility to women's rugby may be on the wane, our analysis suggests a more complex picture. The most obvious and influential illustration of these factors can be determined through the media where the coverage of women's rugby has been generally mixed and limited. *Rugby World*, the rugby magazine with the widest international circulation, normally devotes up to one page to women's rugby, and a similar pattern is repeated in other rugby publications or popular newspapers. This under-representation of 'rugby women' in the media is similar to the general pattern for all women's sport.

The particular way sport is covered also hints at the reluctant toleration of rugby as an option for women, rather than its broad acceptance. The media routinely portrays women's rugby as a novelty event, and, likewise, the women who play are represented through 'fluff' pieces or photos that represent them in highly sexual and/or feminine poses or the opposite extreme as 'ugly' or brutish types who are not 'real women'.¹⁹ The media emphasise that women are capable of retaining an ideal feminine quality despite their obvious athleticism, which promotes gendered differences.²⁰ In the late 1990s for example, the New

Zealand media initially made much of the fact that Melodie Robinson, one of the national rugby team players, is a former Miss Canterbury and thus a 'real' woman. An extreme example of the representation of women rugby players appeared in 1995 in a feature article with accompanying pictures in the Australian sporting monthly magazine *Inside Sport*, which, on the one hand, depicted female rugby players as dirty, unattractive and masculine and then positioned some players' as 'real women' by including glamorous, highly-sexualised photos of them off the field. The article thus frames the story along the lines of 'what are nice girls like you doing playing a sport like this?' or 'Can you believe these are rugby players when you see them all dressed up'. This brief discussion highlights a contradiction that underlies coverage of women's sport, and especially women's rugby, though we will see that these conceptions are present at club level as well. While the media continues such contradictory coverage of female rugby players and their game coverage will undermine women's efforts, further trivialising them and their competitions.

Women thus face 'symbolic annihilation', as the advancement of stereotypes such as 'women who play rugby are butch/lesbian/men' and thus not 'real' women, overshadow the skill and the competitiveness of the women's game. Such a process works hand in hand with a trivialisation/marginalisation framework that compares women's rugby performances directly with those of men. The combination of these factors 'support and reproduce the masculine values and practices of competitive sport'.²¹ It is in this context that we sought to better understand how and why women come to play such a hyper-masculinised sport and what they feel about the game, wider perceptions of women playing rugby and how they relate to the practices of rugby that have been so inscribed as definers of masculinity: as things that 'make men'. In order to do this we focussed on one women's rugby team in Brisbane, Australia and their experiences within a larger male dominated club.²² All of the team members were interviewed in 1998 and some in 1997. Interviews were also held with the team's coach, club officials and some male club members. A survey of male attitudes towards women players was also undertaken. In addition, the first author participated in training, went to team meetings and observed matches and post-match and other social functions throughout 1998.

Background

Men's rugby first became established in Queensland in the 1880s. By 1887, just five years after the first recorded rugby match in the town, there were 36 registered rugby clubs.²³ The club we investigated began in 1911 and has a history of success with nearly 200 players having been selected to represent Queensland, though in the 1990s the club has not been as successful. By contrast, a women's rugby competition only began in 1993 in Queensland and the women's team at the club has won the majority of premierships in this competition. Queensland women who wanted to play held meetings in 1992

with existing male rugby clubs and secured support from several so that a competition could begin. The women's competition plays under the Australian under-19 rules that apply to all categories of rugby other than men's first grade. The only real differences are in scrummaging rules and match length. Under these rules, once the ball enters the scrum it is not allowed to move more than one and a half metres. The length of halves in the women's game is 35 minutes compared with forty minutes for men. Otherwise, the game is the same. Most of the women players have vast sporting experience, some having represented the state or nation in other sports prior to taking up rugby union. The age of players at the club extends from 18 to 35, though most are in their early twenties. Most of the players went to private schools where sporting opportunities, though broad, were limited to those deemed appropriate for women such as netball, hockey, swimming and athletics.

So what attracted women to play rugby union when many of them played other sports at a high level? Some of the players interviewed began when friends asked them to try the sport, many for its novelty value. One player stated clearly that she wanted to be able to play any sport that boys could play:

The first I heard about it was when they started . . . the team down at the club, and a friend of mine from school . . . said, 'Let's go down and play', 'cause we had always gone down and watched the guys play. We just thought it would be really cool [and] we could show that we were just as tough as the boys.

A minority of the players had experience playing rugby league at state high schools and many had played touch rugby, the latter one of the fastest growing social sports in Australasia.

Bodies on the Line: Rugby, Teamwork and Friendship

Unlike most other team sports, in rugby union an individual cannot succeed for more than a couple of seconds without significant support from the rest of the team. In men's rugby, the type of teamwork needed has long been imbued with larger educational properties. To play rugby well as part of a team and to take the physical punishment without complaint was thought to prepare middle and upper class men for challenges in adult life.²⁴ As Richard Light shows elsewhere in this issue, in Japan the masculine concepts that surround rugby fused with Japanese codes of manly behaviour and emerged in the practice of rugby amongst players of individual sacrifice to the point of physical and emotional exhaustion. For these Australian women, the links between physicality and bodily sacrifice for the team and teammates is a significant part of the game that binds players together as a team and as friends. Carly highlighted her love of rugby by stating:

I honestly believe there is no other sport that is as physically and mentally demanding. It is fitness, it is strength. It is power and it is thinking the whole time. There are some sports which are actually predictable. . . . With rugby there are so many things that are out of your control. *You could be the best player in the country but if you haven't got somebody else when you get tackled to come and support you, there is absolutely no point* [emphasis added].

This necessity led the women to form close friendships off the field and to spend much of their socialising time together. Kirsty suggested that the reasons come from the intense physicality in rugby:

I think that you get to make friends that you don't ever make in any other sport. I've played netball at higher levels and stuff like that and you don't make such good friends at netball. There's not the social and camaraderie that you get with rugby and I think part of that is that when *you* are out on the field *you are kind of putting your body in the hands of someone else*. You're saying, '*Right, I'm going to go down over that ball and I expect you to protect me and I know you can do that*'. I think a real trust forms and I think that's part of the reason friendships are so intense and good [emphasis added].

From the general comments of all players it can be deduced that the rough nature of rugby and the teamwork required creates a social bonding that is perceived as stronger than in other sports. The intense nature of friendships and loyalty may also be enhanced due to the marginal nature of rugby as an acceptable female sporting practice within wider society. Farah Palmer in a similar study of a women's rugby club in New Zealand argued that women form close relationships as part of identification with rugby as something that sets them off from other sub-cultures.²⁵ In addition, while there are eight men's teams at the club, there is only one women's team, thus the women are in a minority within the rugby club as well as beyond it.

A Women's Rugby Culture?

Without exception, the women we studied all believe that the social environment that surrounds the team is a major contributing factor to their enjoyment of rugby. The set-up of the club house includes a function room, storage and physiotherapy centre, a dance floor and a bar. The clubhouse overlooks the primary playing field, and regular functions are held after every home game, while gatherings throughout the year are also organised for both the male and female players at various pubs and clubs. Although drinking was not compulsory, and several female players do not drink for health and

religious reasons, the majority of these social occasions placed a large emphasis on alcohol consumption. Unofficial 'awards' of alcohol were given to the players in recognition of their efforts on the field and at the formal presentation dinner, male prize winners for all of the teams were given jugs of beer while the women's Best and Fairest player was given a glass. The player then had to drink it as quickly as possible, as was the norm with most drinking occasions. This in itself is significant, as it reinforces the existing stereotypes that women cannot take the same amounts of drink as men and heavy beer drinking is not really ladylike. Many men believe women are supposed to be physiologically unable to 'handle their piss'.²⁶

Men have defined most aspects of the rugby subculture, and their actions provide a 'yardstick' via which women's behaviour and then potential acceptance is often measured. Desire for acceptance often leads the women to adopt behaviours that in other circumstances would not be seen as appropriate or welcome. Examining women's rugby in the United States, where women have not had to come under the specific authority of male clubs, Wheatley argues that women's behaviours serve to separate and distinguish their cultural form and are carried out through various traditions and practices that are neither determined nor defined by men. She states:

The women's version of rugby disrupts the male, heterosexual hegemony of the rugby subculture by exposing female physical capability in a typically male enclave, while openly expressing a distinct identity and lifestyle through its social proclivities. The women's rugby style challenges patriarchal ideology in sport and leisure and social and sexual relations.²⁷

In Australian and New Zealand clubs, however, it is clear that women players have adopted behaviours that conform to dominant 'manly' traditions surrounding rugby. A desire to be viewed as 'one of the [rugby] boys', and, therefore, to cement their standing within the club itself, has led women players to adopt cultural attributes that emulate men in the club.

At the club, Tuesday night became recognised as the time where the 'gossip' of the past weekend's exploits was broadcast to the team, and special attention was given to the weekend drinking exploits of certain players. Those who were not known as heavy drinkers were often ribbed for their poor 'performance', as were those who initiated or participated in casual romantic relationships with any of the club's male players during the season. Although all of the women insisted there was no pressure on any particular players to drink, they also acknowledged that the structure of the social events certainly encouraged it. One stated:

I play it because I really like the people I play with. I really enjoy the club I really enjoy the club situation. Through the club I have met so many people in the other Grades and you always know that if you rock up to the club, there will always be people you can chat and have a beer with. It's just a really nice atmosphere. . . . I've got friends from footy and I find the time I spend with them is drinking time. It's not peer pressure, it is just because we all like to drink. I suppose it is part of the culture.

Another replied:

Occasionally I'll go out and not drink, that will be a rare thing, it may only happen once or twice a year, but that wouldn't be a problem. I'd be the driver and sort of keep and eye on everyone and make sure everyone sticks together and that sort of thing. I don't think that not drinking is a problem, but it is definitely the exception.

The majority of interaction between the male and female teams occurred in a drinking environment, and it was at these functions that the women felt they were most accepted. One of the women stated: 'the vast majority of [drinking] would be after a game, [we'd] have a few beers. If it is someone's birthday you invite the entire team to the party. If we socialise with the men it is definitely in a pub environment or a function'. This interaction was later qualified by the women's coach who felt that the reason the women got on the in the club was because they conformed to what the men expected of them in that environment:

The women came in and the first year they were here, they made such a difference to this club, you wouldn't believe. This club was the most anti-social, mixing club I have ever been in my life. If you had a pie night you would be lucky to get six people there. We didn't have functions and if we did then nobody turned up, except for the annual dinner which is usually booked out. The first year they put on very cheap meals of Tuesdays and Thursday nights and the girls came, and it was a different atmosphere from the start. The guys came and talked to girls and girls talked to guys which was great, It was quite a marked difference in the atmosphere. Now they have been accepted here more so, and better then any other club. Probably because they are a little more feminine than for some of the girls in the other clubs. I think while they maintain this level, they'll be accepted.

It is clear from the above evidence that women players are accepted in the club as long as they try to look feminine whilst conforming to dominant behaviours within the rugby culture. The women players are thus faced with having to perform the rugby culture while performing 'femininity'. Indeed, despite outward appearances of acceptance, an undercurrent of male hostility was also present.

Reactions From Past and Present Male Rugby Players

As women enter traditionally masculine arenas and sanctuaries at an accelerated rate the 'changing relations between the sexes lead men to stake out and fiercely protect clearly demarcated masculine space.'²⁸ Sport, and more specifically combative sports such as rugby union, are seen to be the last true male preserves, and as such, the women, who are now threatening the traditions and masculine exclusivity of rugby, are symbolically degraded, mocked or vilified.²⁹ This degradation is acknowledged by most of the women players. Mary Boutilier and Lucinda SanGiovanni cite three main reasons why men resist women's entry into sport. First, the underlying desire to keep sport as a masculine agency that serves to prescribe specific roles men will undertake in their adult life. Second, to maintain the current ranking of sex roles, and finally, to 'preserve an exclusively male realm that allows for expressiveness and intimacy – qualities that are typically absent from what is generally viewed as appropriate behaviour for men'.³⁰ These factors are epitomised by the organisation surrounding rugby union clubs in general, and is individually highlighted through the marginalisation of women rugby players, both from the outside public and from within the club. Theberge proposes that one way this marginalisation occurs is through the male domination of the administration and organisation of sporting clubs.³¹ This club is no different, although it has one female manager and a female physiotherapist (as well as a male one). Only two of thirteen members of the club board are women. Additionally, despite the women's team being incorporated for five years there are no female coaches. Club personnel argue, however, that there are no qualified female coaches (though one of the women's team members has coached overseas). One board member, who has been on the club board for more than a decade, also said that it was generally accepted that it would be a long time before women would be qualified enough to be able to coach rugby teams. He was present when the proposition to affiliate a women's team was presented to the board and stated:

We accepted the fact that women's rugby should come in, but it wasn't our committee that decided to start up a women's rugby team. On the other side of the world everybody plays women's rugby. If they [the women] wanted to play they should be able to play. It would have been different if Australia was the first country to play it. There was still opposition from

lots of people like . . . ‘Rugby’s a man’s game and this is men’s stuff, even now the women are there [at the club] but they are not noticed.

With this in mind, perhaps the most marked responses to the women rugby players were highlighted through the women’s perception of what the male rugby players of the club thought of them, compared with the men’s true reactions. All the women players felt the men were incredibly supportive of their efforts both on and off the field. One stated, ‘Hands down they are the most supportive club. From word of mouth from other girls from other clubs a lot of them are just flat out getting training grounds’. And another stated, ‘En masse we are very lucky, we are the luckiest team in Australia. We have the best assimilation between the men and women, there is no doubt. . . . We are so lucky. I honestly believe the boys view us in a very positive light’.

The disparity between the women’s and men’s beliefs is more clearly illustrated in comments collected in a confidential written survey from male club players, both from First Grade and Colts’ teams. Although all of the w-omen players saw the men as being supportive of their achievements, quite different reactions appeared when male player’s perceptions were recorded. Although the men responded in a generally supportive way as was expected by the women, it was done in such a manner that showed little respect for their game. The men felt the only reason they were around to watch the women’s team play was because the women played after First Grade and they were at the club drinking with their team-mates.

In addition, male players also harboured some negativity towards their female counterparts. One male club member said:

Girls in footy gear, covered in dirt, bashing the shit out of each other is not my idea of attractiveness. I think it is more the social interaction after the games that leads to any kind of friendships. My support is pretty much limited to “well done” if they win and “bad luck” if they lose.

Generally the men responded in a patronising or denigrating tone when referring to the women’s game. ‘As a spectacle I think very little of it. It is unfair to compare them to the guys Girls rugby just can’t compete in a game revolving around strength and speed, they can’t be expected to’. Another responded, ‘Personally I have only found novelty value out of the whole concept of “chicks” rugby’. Two of the respondents made directly hostile remarks towards their female counterparts: ‘Every now and then I come across one with just a little too much testosterone for a so-called woman. This is a big turnoff. They aren’t designed to play rugby and if they want to play with footys they should stick to touch football’. The other agreed by saying, ‘Rugby

is a man's sport. As long as they realise this and don't try to match us, things will be all right'.

When re-questioned about these type of reactions from male club players, the women players remained adamant that they were the lucky ones, who were being allowed to play the game. One stated, 'We need to learn from these boys, they have been playing for 200 years and we've been playing for five. We are so lucky'. Any overtly negative reactions were accepted on an individual level or attributed to the fact that the boys were acting well within their rights as male members of the club. One example of this type of reaction occurred at the end of year club dinner where the Master of Ceremonies actually had to ask the crowd (made up of predominantly male players) to respect the recognition the 'girls' were being given by one of their senior players, The women attributed this behaviour to the fact that the boys were 'drunk and just being boys'. This reaction was defended by some of the male players as being a reaction to the particular individual presenting, rather than as a lack of respect to the women's team on a whole.

The above responses illustrate two things. First, the fact the women believe they are getting a good deal, even though they are discriminated against, emphasises how they serve to reproduce patriarchal assumptions that are present in hyper-masculinised environments, such as the rugby club. Second, the way women excuse male behaviour also reinforces the gender order and escalates existing male dominance. Even though some players may react in this manner because they are intimidated about speaking out against the sometimes negative environment, through observation it was determined that the majority of women players just did not realise they might be entitled to something better.

Likewise, the majority of the women believed the rugby administration to be incredibly supportive of the women's team. Louise stated:

Admin are great. We get the same rights as everyone else in the club which is excellent and I know a lot of other clubs have had trouble with the admin and they weren't accepted by the club as a rule . . . I think that's one good thing about [our club], that there's no problem like that.

Yet, she qualifies this by stating:

We always get the worst training oval. Last year we trained on 5C which is the little strip between the main oval and second oval. We didn't even have our own oval to train on, which was fine, you know. It was more than adequate for us and we got used to it. [This year] we've been put on to the second oval but we've sort of snuck onto the first oval, I don't

know how. It's good. It is so much better, but I mean that's fair enough I suppose. First and Second Grade are their [the club's] priority.

This type of response illustrates the obvious conundrum facing the female players, where, aside from the more obvious negative reactions from the male players, much more subversive marginalisation also seems to go either unnoticed, or is in fact accepted as being appropriate. This is perfectly illustrated in Louise's summation of the training fields. As she mentioned, originally the women did not even have an playing field to train on and they had to run on a strip of grass that ran between the two main ovals. Five years after a women's team was incorporated at the club and four premierships later, the women were finally given a position on an oval, which they share with two other men's teams. Again, this did not seem to bother any of the women, and in fact most of them felt they were 'lucky' because they had been given any ground at all.

Another factor that illustrates subversive marginalisation of the women can be seen at Tuesday night training where an impromptu meeting is held for all club members. Various messages, congratulations, selection and playing results, as well as items of interest and finance are broadcast to the players. On only a few occasions were the women addressed specifically, even though they were the most successful team in the club: the only team to make it to a grand final; while individually fifteen players made the Queensland squad and four the Australian national team that reached the semi-finals of the 1998 World Cup. Likewise the language that was used by the various 'announcers' excluded the women by its very nature, when the speakers constantly referred to the group as 'guys', 'fellas' or 'gentlemen', and rarely corrected themselves. When they did correct themselves, it was an exaggerated effort, and, on occasion, condescending. Comments such as 'Gentlemen, and of course the lovely ladies' illustrate this attitude, though such comments were generally ignored by the female players. One player said she did not mind being addressed in this way as it made her feel 'like one of the guys and more accepted'.

This type of marginalisation was not restricted to this club and is a feature of the entire Brisbane women's competition. The women's teams were usually given inadequate playing times and were held after the men's first grade match, and thus were often the last match of the weekend. This meant that the playing conditions were often dangerous due to poor lighting conditions or due to the roughness and poor quality of the fields. Many women complained of the poor state of facilities. As each of the clubs were individually responsible for the allocation of grounds and match times, however, there was little opportunity for change to be initiated. Some clubs failed to supply referees, resulting in non-qualified people taking control of the game, and at some venues the women were not supplied with changing rooms and had to strip down in the

in-goal area in front of the male and female spectators. Aside from a few grumblings from a couple of the more experienced players, nothing was said of these circumstances within the group, and only through direct questioning were these issues addressed by the players. One replied:

I guess we can always claim our ground and say we're training here if we are training on an oval, and I don't think any of the girls have any qualms about walking into a changing room and saying 'we need to get changed in here'. . . . And you know we are always given sheds at [our club] but at some of the other clubs you just have to walk in and say, come on we need the sheds. We've done that before; we just need to stand up for ourselves. I'm sure the blokes from the other grades would just walk in on another team if they were getting changed. We are really quite lucky.

The only real bonus for women's rugby in Brisbane is that many matches are played after the top men's teams so the number of spectators who see them play is much greater than might otherwise be the case. Many who watch come away impressed with the skill levels among the women players, though this acceptance is often reluctant or qualified with other comments about women playing such a 'masculine' game.

A Pack of 'Women?': Public Perceptions and Player Reactions

Due to the inevitable controversy that surrounds participation of women in any sport which has socially, historically and culturally been defined as 'masculine', reactions to women's participation in rugby vary widely. Throughout the observation process we determined that the players all thought that outsiders generally approved of their playing, however, variations became apparent after observing and questioning different groups from parents and other male relatives, to older club members and spectators to male players. The women believed they were supported and that their rugby was seen to be a good thing in the eyes of their peers, work-mates, some of their parents and particularly within the (male) club. Reactions from the general public ranged from amusement, to direct interest about the format of the women's game, to out and out disgust, and, for a minority, general approval. Such diversified responses were typical of the players 'out of rugby' friends or work-mates who are defined by a greater number of demographic and social values.

When players' parents were asked what they thought of their daughters playing rugby, almost without exception, the initial response was negative. After examining the replies we determined that there are two main reasons why family members were not overly happy about a female relative taking to rugby union. First, negativity was attributed to the fear of injury either in a game, or

during training. Stacey felt both of her parents did not actively support her playing rugby for this reason: 'My mother who plays tennis and all that sort of stuff, is not keen, she is still not keen. Well I guess she's not totally against it, she comes and watches a game when they are in town, but she's scared of injury'. Likewise, Louise felt most of her mother's opposition to the game stemmed from concern about injury:

Mum said, 'No, you are not allowed to play', she was really against it. She was afraid of me getting hurt and all that sort of stuff. . . . When I first went down to [rugby] I didn't tell her that I was playing because I knew she would not like it.

Louise also has a brother who played rugby throughout school and college, but neither her mother nor father expressed the same concerns for his safety. Injury fears stemmed mainly from other female family members, although most them eventually became more supportive either after they had seen a game, or had come to the realisation that the physical contact was relative. One player in fact attributes her mother's initial negative response to a knee-jerk reaction shaped by years of stereotypical conditioning.

The second type of negative reaction from parents, conformed more specifically to the stereotypes associated with the game, that it is unsuitable for women as it is too rough, 'a man's game' or even unladylike. Although this type of reaction was evidenced by Stacey's mother, this type of reaction was most common from fathers or other family members who had played rugby previously. One player felt both her ex-rugby-playing father and brother were very against the idea of her playing the sport for these reasons. She said:

[It is] wrong, wrong, wrong. My dad has played rugby all of his life and he said, 'This is not a girl's game, this is not for girls'.

My brother, although he respects the ability of the sportswomen, he knows they are very fit, very strong and very healthy, but he just doesn't think women should be in a contact sport.

Another stated:

[My brother] doesn't like me doing it because women shouldn't play rugby. They are not physically built for it. . . . I don't actually think he has seen me play. . . . My flatmate is really against it. He admits it is fine that I play, but he seriously thinks that we shouldn't play because we are not physiologically built for it.

And finally Kirsty replied: 'Well dad said, "Oh my God, I have finally got a boy"'!

These responses are typical of the stereotypes promoted by the public schools in the nineteenth century and subsequently by hegemonic masculine attitudes surrounding violent contact sport. These type of values still exist, and are reinforced, in the private, Greater Public Schools in Brisbane. Masculine values are supported in two main ways throughout these educational institutions. First, the current relationship between the 'brother' and sister' private schools fosters separatist attitudes towards rugby union. As rugby is still seen to be the most manly and prestigious sport for the boys at these schools, much emphasis is placed on playing in the First XV, and wearing the school's jersey with pride. Games are held on Saturday afternoons, with the girls of the 'sister' schools often in attendance. Many of the women acknowledged that it was seen to be the socially acceptable thing to do and admitted they were aware that their main role was one of support, rather than to show a genuine interest in the game. One player stated, 'The boys played it at Grammar and I watched that just because it was a big social event'. This type of response also extended to the co-ed private schools where rugby is again actively promoted as the distinguished sport for boys, while netball is the most celebrated and illustrious sport for girls. This structure is reinforced through the social activities that surround both games as well as certain events that incorporate the two 'flag-carrier' teams. At one of these schools, a netball competition between the A Grade schoolgirl team and the First XV rugby side was an annual event, with parents and administration drawing on its appeal to fund raise and socialise. A rugby match between the two sides, however, would never be considered. These examples illustrate how schools still serve to echo and reinforce popular ideals, and in turn reinforce the lower status of women's sport in society.

The second way masculinist beliefs are protected and fostered in Australian schools is through compliance with education administration. Although club players came from state and private schools, many believed the sport, social and cultural structure of GPS schools would result in them being less likely to adopt a physical game for women as a school sport in the future. Although many of those who attended single-sex GPS schools thought rugby was accepted by their peers, they all agreed that the more 'conservative' administration would never adopt such an 'unladylike sport'. One club player who is still at school, campaigned for the inclusion of women's rugby at her GPS school. Although she established what the Queensland Rugby Union thought was an appropriate and viable format for a school competition, she was initially turned down by her headmistress, based on specific issues of supervision, safety and time allocation. She then adapted her plan to address these issues, however, was turned down again with no apparent reason given. There is a long way to go before women rugby union players are accepted widely and girls are given the similar opportunities to play as boys.

Conclusion

Despite hostile attitudes from many quarters, rugby is one of the fastest growing sports for women internationally. It is attractive due to the physical contact, the teamwork and loyalties that are part of the game. As this case study demonstrates, women who take up rugby union face a number of obstacles from hostile family members to poor training and match conditions. When players were asked, they were quick to point out problems but felt that the positives far outweighed the negatives. Women continually referred to their genuine love for rugby and the social interaction surrounding the game. Many stated they 'lived for rugby', which provided them with the chance to enjoy a physical contact sport where they could test their bodies. This group of women playing a 'man's game' suggests they are directly challenging the hegemonic structure that surrounds and defines contemporary sporting cultures, particularly in rugby union. Although previous studies of women in 'masculine' sports have framed their analyses in terms of resistance to male-dominated sporting structures and cultures, it is clear that the situation for women involved in the playing of these sports is more complex and cannot be reduced to resistant cultural practices. The players, although apparently stretching the boundaries of feminine-appropriate behaviour, conform to male expectations of how they should 'perform' their roles in rugby on and off the field. Much more-comparative work needs to be done on women in rugby union, but it is at least clear from the studies done thus far that women who play rugby relate to the game and its attendant cultural practices in a similar fashion to men.

NOTES:

1. For example, see S. Birrell and N. Theberge, 'Ideological control of women in sport', in M. Costa and S. Guthrie, eds, *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994).
2. J. McKay, *Managing Gender: Affirmative Action and Organisational Power in Australian, Canadian and New Zealand Sport* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).
3. L. Randall, 'Women and sport in Australia', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, (August 1993), 20.
4. R. Connell, 'The state, gender and sexual politics', *Theory and Society*, 19, 507-44; M. A. Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1996).
5. Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, p. 50.
6. E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney, 1994), p. 14.

7. N. Theberge, 'Gender, sport and the construction of community: a case study from women's ice hockey', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12:4 (1995) 390.
8. For example, see M. Messner, 'Sport and male domination: the female athlete as contested ideological terrain', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5:3 (1988), 197-211; M. B. Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).
9. Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, p. 64.
10. G. Rail, 'Physical contact in women's basketball: a first interpretation', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 25:4 (1990), 269-84; G. Rail, 'Physical contact in women's basketball: a phenomenological construction and contextualisation', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 27:1 (1992), 1-22.
11. Theberge, 'Gender, sport and the construction of community'.
12. See M. C. Duncan and C. Hasbrook, 'Denial of power in televised women's sports', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5:1 (1988), 1-21.
13. M. Phillips, 'Football, class and war: the rugby codes in New South Wales, 1907-1918', in J. Nauright and T. J.L. Chandler, eds., *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 158-80.
14. J. Bale, 'Women's football in England: a socio-geographic perspective', *Physical Education Review*, 3:2 (1980), 137.
15. S. Thompson, 'Challenging the hegemony: New Zealand women's opposition to rugby and the reproduction of a capitalist patriarchy', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 23:3 (1988), 206.
16. For more on this, see Thompson, 'Challenging the hegemony', 204-12; J. Nauright and D. Black, "'Hitting them where it hurts": Springbok-All Black rugby, masculine national identity and counter-hegemonic struggle, 1959-1992', in Nauright and Chandler, eds, *Making Men*, pp. 181-204.
17. See M. Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991).
18. Messner, 'Sports and male domination', p. 197
19. For a discussion of this process, see M. C. Duncan, 'Sports photographs and sexual difference: images of women and men in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7:1 (1990), 22-43.
20. Birrell and Theberge, 'Ideological control of women in sport'.
21. R. Pirinen, 'Catching up with men?: Finnish newspaper coverage of women's entry into traditionally male sports', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 32:3 (1997), 239-49.

22. Interviews were conducted during the 1997 and 1998 seasons by Alison Carle who also attended training and club and team functions. The names of participants have been changed due to the sensitive nature of some of the material. Original data is held by the researchers at The University of Queensland.
23. For a discussion of the early history of rugby in Queensland, see P. Horton, 'Rugby union football and its role in the socio-cultural development of Queensland, 1882-1891', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 9:1 (1992), 119-31.
24. Tim Chandler has researched this aspect of rugby in some detail, for example, see T. J.L. Chandler, 'The structuring of manliness and the development of rugby football at the public schools and Oxbridge, 1830-1880', in Nauright and Chandler, eds, *Making Men*, pp. 13-31.
25. F. Palmer, 'An Ethnographical Study of the Women's Rugby Subculture in New Zealand: Challenging and Contributing to Societal Norms of Femininity', unpublished B.Phed. Honours Thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
26. R. Masters, 'The Joy Ruck Club', *The Independent Monthly*, June 1996, pp. 44-5.
27. E. Wheatley, 'Subcultural subversions: comparing discourses on sexuality in men's and women's rugby songs': in S. Birrell and C. Cole, eds, *Women, Sport, and Culture* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994) p. 207.
28. Birrell and Cole, *Women, Sport, and Culture*, p. 160.
29. E. Dunning, 'Sport as a male preserve: notes on the social acceptance of masculine identity and its transformations', in Birrell and Cole, eds, *Women, Sport, and Culture*, pp. 163-79.
30. M.A. Boutilier and L. SanGiovanni, *The Sporting Woman* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1983), pp. 100-101.
31. N. Theberge, 'Towards a feminist alternative to sport as a male preserve', in Birrell and Cole, eds, *Women, Sport, and Culture*, pp. 181-92.