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A Compliant Femininity in Sport: Women and Netball

Netball is played in schools, community and state competitions and at representative and professional levels across Australia. While some men and boys are now involved in netball it is still dominated by female involvement in all aspects of the game from players to umpires, coaches and administrators. Netball has the highest level of female participation of any team sport and in a study of national sports participation, it was found that 287,000 females aged 15 years and over played netball in 1995-96 and 285,800 in 1997-98. How did this sport evolve from its early twentieth century origins as a modified game of basketball to assume its current number one position as a sport for women?

This paper examines netball within a socio-historical framework that incorporates a discussion of gender and social relations, ideology, and hegemonic positioning. Using archived association minutes and correspondence, newspaper articles and interviews with netball players and administrators, netball was designed, promoted and promulgated to enhance the ideals of a “compliant femininity,” a premise that provided a socially legitimated foundation for netball and positioned it as an acceptable activity for women and girls. In chronicling the history of netball in Australia it is suggested that the structure and delivery of this women’s sport can be broadly interpreted as symbolic of societal expectations of women and sports. Societal conventions that have been circumscribed in the public presentation of women in sports in terms of both appearance and actions, that is, what sports they played and how they played these sports. From the selection and modification of game rules through to its course of development and administration, netball has encapsulated dimensions of social practice and a particular form of compliant femininity. The negotiation of acceptable boundaries and the way in which women have used the spaces created by their netball participation make for compelling analogies about the place of women in our society and the social construction of gender relations.

However, it is too easy to simply categorize netball as an extension of prescribed social practices, a sport that has

promulgated the subordination of women and reinforced the existing social order. This categorization would suggest that all women who played netball were compliant subjects who were not able to challenge or resist socially constructed ideals of femininity. Conversely, the female domination of netball could be interpreted as a statement of independence, a form of resistance to the normative model of sport and an act of female solidarity. Netball created an acceptable avenue for women to strive for physical excellence within the established social order by reassuring that the dress, and behavior of its players was appropriate. This constant reinforcement of femininity ultimately served to define netball from other sports and provided a space in which to applaud women's achievements instead of measuring women against male standards. As such netball has had the unique opportunity to challenge hegemonic definitions of masculinity in sport and it was able to provide a sport that women could feel free to express their abilities not just as players, but as coaches, umpires and administrators.

Herein lies the paradox of netball; has it been an avenue of emancipation or one of restriction? Have its participants contested societal expectations of women in sport or constituted a compliant adherence by restricting the game to women only for so many years? Have the players accepted and agreed with its conservative official rules and regulations or have they been able to develop a form of resistance from within the sport? This paper suggests that to dichotomize netball participation into one extreme position or another would be to ignore its place in the lives of individual women. Within the boundaries of the game these women and girls have been able to negotiate a position that does not directly contest societal expectations, but provides women with the space to enjoy the benefits and enjoyment of sport participation. In the world of sports women have typically been allotted to subordinate positions however, within netball women have not had to contend with male claims of superiority.



L-R: James Coates, Keith Harrison, Eddie Comeaux, & Manque Winters