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Making the Boys Cry: The Performative Dimensions of Fluid Gender

This paper argues that the performative element of athletic competition is a significant yet under-theorized aspect in the creation of gender Discourses and that athletic competition provides a venue where the performance of gender is more fluid than traditionally acknowledged. I suggest that if we wish to understand the gender dynamics involved in athletic competition, it is necessary to approach gender as a fluid, rather than solid, concept. While traditional studies of female athletic involvement have approached gender as a set of stable behaviors and expectations, doing so imposes an artificial set of constructs on the actual ways in which boys and girls, men and women, perform their genders, thereby overlooking the highly dynamic and complex gender work that is being done. This paper examines how young girls who participate in combat sports such as wrestling, a traditionally male stronghold, perform continually shifting gender identities that interweave physical traits and behaviors typically coded as masculine or feminine. Drawing upon autoethnographic and ethnographic methodologies, I demonstrate how a study of actual lived body experience grounded in a fluid conception of gender is able to remain sensitive to the unique performative gender work being done while simultaneously providing a critical interrogation of the moments in which the performance of gender is inscribed as nonconformative.

Key Words: Athletics, Gender, Performance, Sports, Fluid

Making the Boys Cry: The Performative Dimensions of Fluid Gender

[W]omen's sports in particular has shown us in the last few decades just how radically gender norms can be altered through a spectacular public restaging.

Judith Butler ("Athletic" 108)

You know, sometimes it's nice to be all girly and get dressed up fancy. But sometimes it's nice to be all tough and boyish. I like to do both things.

Elise Miller, 2/8/2007

When most Americans think of wrestling, they think of a flamboyant, hyper-masculine, over-the-top spectacle of large men and chesty women jumping off turnbuckles and hitting each other with chairs. This article is not about that. This essay is instead about the competitive sport of wrestling, youth folkstyle wrestling in particular. But it is not really a paper about wrestling, as much as it is a reflection on the way in which female youth use sports, in this case a combat-sport, to craft complex gender identities capable of radically restructuring physical traits and behaviors typically coded as masculine or feminine.

This paper emerges out of my own experiences as a coach and parent, yet also draws extensively on my eight-year-old daughter Elise's experiences as an athlete, and is thus set somewhere between the auto-ethnographic and ethnographic traditions of inquiry. For the past three years I have recorded my observations about practices, conversations and tournaments, as well as recorded informal conversations and more

formal interviews with my daughter about her own experiences, and more importantly, her perception of those experiences. Whenever possible, I attempt to let my daughter speak through her own words, to give voice to the reality that she alone experiences, and thus in small some sense, I hope, make available, or at least stay out of the way of, her own development and empowerment. Of necessity, however, I also bring my own reactions, interpretations, and observations to this analysis, hoping ultimately to craft a joint narrative that explores, critiques, and troubles the complex relationship between sports, gender and identity.

Athletics or sports have begun to receive increasing attention as a serious area of academic study. In many respects, athletics are a cultural representation of our social relations (Hall 135). As an area of research then, athletics provides an opportunity to study the communicative behavior of society writ large in a manageable and culturally potent arena.

Within our discipline sports has been examined for its cultural, communicative components. Most of these studies have focused on the ways that audiences or spectators, and sometimes coaches and competitors, use sports to make sense of their world or locate themselves within a specific network of communities. Based on this research we know that organized sports play an important constitutive role, among other things helping people to affirm a nationalist identity (Butterworth), reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Trujillo) or self-identify and bond as part of a community (Kassing et al.). The majority of research on women in athletics has focused on mediated depictions of female athletes, both discursively and visually. Not surprisingly, research suggests that while mainstream media depictions of female athletes have improved over the past several decades (in the

sense of providing more balanced coverage and less frequent occurrences of blatant gender stereotyping), the media still tend to reinforce gender binaries and perpetuate stereotypical gendered behavior via subtle stereotypes (e.g., Fink and Kensicki; Goodman, Duke and Sutherland; Shugart -1).

Organized sports are also a phenomenally rich resource for studying identity formation in general, and gendered identity construction in particular, precisely because of the set of cultural assumptions through which athletics operate; much of the allure of sports, after all, comes from the belief that what we participate in and watch is an acultural experience – that at the end of the day athletic competition is decided by empirical skills, not cultural beliefs. As Cole has suggested, sports provide the illusory arena whereby we as a culture watch these supposedly prediscursive, natural bodies compete free of the social, cultural, and political pressures normally seen as filtering gender (7). Athletic competition, in other words, provides the one space where we believe that all cultural trappings are set aside and raw bodies compete against one another on the proverbial level playing field. Closely bound to this construction of the athletic contest as the ultimate expression of equal opportunity is the corresponding belief that inequality is a part of the natural order (Messner- 76). Sports, we believe, thus provide the perfect venue by which the physical cream rises to the top – a physical litmus test of bodies. Race, ethnicity, gender, sex – none of these markers matter once competition begins, we are told; only the skills and discipline that the sport in question demands are what matter.

The reality, of course, is that sport, as a gendered cultural form itself, bears a significant relation to gender segregation and inequality in other realms of society (Theberge "Toward" 181). If, as Butler has argued, gender is the "discursive/cultural

means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture” (Butler 1990 7), then it stands to reason that female athletic involvement holds tremendous potential to radically challenge our conceptions of a sexed nature. It is precisely the belief that wrestling represents nothing more than the physical prowess of one competitor over another that so powerfully informs the readings of gender and sex brought to bear in making sense of girl wrestlers.

This essay takes seriously both the potential empowerment that scholars such as Butler and Halberstam suggest the violation of gender norms can offer, as well as the cautions that these same and other scholars make in recognizing the resilient, creative capacity that cultural ideological interests have to “claw back” and resist challenge. A study such as this provides the distinct advantage of being able to test the theoretical claims advanced by feminist scholars in a highly concrete and applied manner. To that end, this paper ultimately suggests that the nature of athletic performance in co-educational youth wrestling necessitates a more fluid conceptualization of gender than traditionally recognized. Within the athletic performance traits and behaviors typically classified as masculine or feminine instead constitute desirable athletic behavior, and to the extent that these behaviors remain fluid, their enactment constitutes an acceptable conformity to social expectations. In advancing this claim I will turn to two specific areas in which female athletic performance is widely recognized as a violation of traditional gender roles: the physical performance of athleticism and the symbolic meanings attached to the body of the female athlete. In both instances I argue that although there are powerful forms of resistance to gender norm violation, the combination of performative assumptions unique to athletics, resources available for identity

construction, and the creative talents of a precocious eight-year-old, enable a radical restructuring of the ways in which traditionally gendered behaviors and traits are understood and deployed.

Performing The Physical: Embodying Female Power

“Don’t worry, I’m okay.” This oft-repeated phrase signifies one of my daughter’s most endearing yet confounding qualities – the almost alien sense with which she inhabits her body. My beaming, cheerful child is ever tripping, stumbling, falling or flailing as she makes her way through the world, only to bounce back up to her feet with the above refrain. To write that she is clumsy seems to border on the cruel; an abnegation of the parental love I have. Yet, such is the day-to-day reality of my daughter’s physical presence in the world, and to deny it would be to lose sight of part of the importance that wrestling has played in her life.

Proponents of females’ involvement in sports have championed the fact that athletic training allows women to develop strong bodies, thus providing them with a sense of identity and competence (Bryson) and challenge perceptions or expectations that the female body should be smaller, weaker, and more passive than its male counterpart (Hargreaves 2). As Halberstam has observed, “the demands of proper heterosexual femininity coincide with the renouncing of a healthy body.” (58) The athletic female body challenges such gender norms, providing a visible “willful rejection of feminine activity” (Halberstam 58). Numerous scholars of sports sociology have noted that women’s physical presence in sports – strong, sweaty, aggressive, bodies – disrupts traditional gender assumptions (Banet-Weiser 93-102; Bolin 107-129; Dworkin 131-158; Theberge 2000). Such reasoning positions women’s and girls’ athletic involvement

as a “stealth feminism” representative of third wave activism (Heywood and Dworkin 45).

While the physical development that comes from athletic involvement obviously has the liberating potential described above there are significant limits to that potential. As Cole has noted, the transgressive potential of the athletic female body is limited by the logic of late-capitalism, whereby the body of the female athlete comes to be commodified and ultimately marked in a way that reinforces gender binaries and traditional heterosexual femininity (15). Press coverage of female athletes has likewise come under intense criticism for not only commodifying female beauty, but emphasizing physical appearance and personality over athletic performance (Choi). Indeed, a classic double-bind that female athletes are confronted with is that because they violate gender norms, they are under pressure to enact a hyper-femininity, assuring the broader public that they are still heterosexual and available to the male gaze (e.g., Cahn; Choi; Cole; Heywood and Dworkin). Finally, the close tie between sports and culture means that any empowerment provided to women via athletics only extends as far as the cultural climate allows.

While sports are indisputably a positive source of strength and self-development for girls, they can accomplish this only if the environment in which female athletes throw their javelins, kick their soccer balls, and swim their fast and furious laps is an environment that respects girls and takes them seriously as athletes (Heywood and Dworkin 46).

Thus while the physical empowerment for individual female athletes derived from athletic training and competition cannot be denied, the understanding and acceptance of

that empowerment is circumscribed by numerous cultural factors. Indeed, as Theberge (2000) has cautioned, the progressive potential for sports is curtailed by the organizational make-up of professional sports itself. By organizing professional sports along the lines of strength, power and speed (rather than say flexibility, endurance, or fine motor skills), women are destined to be limited in achieving athletic parity (Theberge 2000). The question remains, however, how do female athletes themselves navigate these tensions and understand the role of gender-bending enacted by their athletic performances? The answer, I suggest, is that the nature of athletic performance may often, but not always, reframe the behaviors and traits in question as transcending gender.

Elise is strong. Not strong for a girl, but just strong. She can keep up with any boy on the squad when the team does push-ups during warm-ups, and her form is superior to most. She eagerly asks to be lifted up to the pull-up bars prior to practice and at the age of eight can already do three pull-ups without help. The fact that she knows she is strong, and revels in that knowledge, is illustrated by the following exchange.

“Do you like being strong?”

Mmm hmmm. It makes some hard things be a lot easier. I remember when we were practicing at E_____ (the local college team’s wrestling room) and I was doing pull-ups, and the wrestler from E_____ told me he couldn’t do any. That was fun.

To be “fun” is a high compliment indeed for an eight-year-old. While Elise’s strength is observable during competition, her performance of strength and display of a strong body are perhaps most obvious during practice. She can keep up with any boy on the squad when the team does push-ups during warm-ups, and her form is superior to most – a fact

that she not-too-infrequently will playfully note to her teammates by observing that “*you look like a worm.*” (in reference to their failure to keep their back straight) She eagerly asks to be lifted up to the pull-up bars prior to and/or after practice and at the age of eight can already do three pull-ups without help. The fact that these pull-ups are clearly visible to all in the practice room and that all eyes are upon her is actually appealing to Elise.

When asked specifically about doing pull-ups and being watched, Elise noted:

“I sort of like it. I mean if I’m doing good and being strong, I like it. I like it because it shows I can do the same things as they can [her teammates], or more. And it is just is sort of fun showing them that I’m pretty strong.”

Elise’s words demonstrate recognition on her part that her strength is perceived by some as unusual for a girl, but at the same time is for her a very normal part of being a girl. The fact that she is aware of and enjoys this public display of strength also demonstrates that she is aware of the exercises as a performance and is enacting these behaviors both for herself (to get stronger) as well as for others (to display her strength).

Of course, strength is only a part of the physical prowess needed to excel at wrestling. Wrestling is, in fact, much more technical than many people are aware. While strength comes into play when both opponents are scrambling for position, the majority of moves rely on a combination of speed, flexibility, and perfect body placement. One of the most basic take-downs, the single-leg takedown, has at least four distinct steps that are usually executed in under a second to be effective. The technical proficiency that Elise has developed is, in my mind, perhaps her single most rewarding physical development. Wrestling has given her a new purchase on her body, a sense of comfort and control over it. On the mat, her body moves with fluidity, grace, and confidence. I

am not suggesting that her clumsiness is gone, but it has noticeably diminished, and is now more often the result of her simply not focusing than on a lack of coordination or sense of place.

While it is obvious that she is pleased with her physical adroitness, it is less obvious how she incorporates her strength and technical prowess into her sense of being a girl. On the one hand, she has become a fierce defender of females' physical abilities and potential.

I think girls can do just as well as boys (at wrestling). We can be stronger. We can beat them. Katy is stronger and better than any of the boys.

Indeed. Katy is a young teenager now whom we met three years ago. We first met Katy at the girls state championship. Katy had approached us when she saw our team gear, and introduced herself, telling us that she had used to wrestle for our team before she moved. She immediately befriended Elise, helping her to warm up and sitting alongside me at the mat as I coached Elise. Katy's athletic talents were nothing short of amazing. She had a powerful frame, was tremendously flexible, and unbelievably quick. She had competed internationally and was aggressive and confident in her matches. Watching her wrestle was to watch someone who had mastered the sport and could dominate her opponents. When we next encountered Katy at a mixed-sex tournament, Katy easily advanced to the final round, where she toyed with the top boy wrestler for two periods, finally pinning him in the third. Katy has become a symbol for Elise – the definitive proof that girls are just as good as boys in wrestling.

I remember how a lot of the boys would laugh at her, but she pinned them flat really quick. She was way better than any of the boys. She encouraged me to keep wrestling and stuff.

On the other hand, Elise still seems to wrestle with what such strength and power means for being a girl. As evidenced in her remarks that began this paper, at some level she still sees the physicalness of wrestling as “boyish.” She has also in conversations with her mother and I offered the concept of strength as one of the major sources of resistance to girls’ participation in the sport.

“Elise, why do you think boys make such a big deal out of losing to girls?”

Because boys don’t think that girls should be strong. They think they should win because they have more strength.

Such physical attributes are widely viewed as quintessentially “natural” masculine abilities. Indeed, as Cahn has recognized, it is precisely the assumption that physical qualities like strength, skill, speed and physical dominance are naturally male characteristics that has made it so difficult for women to be accepted as athletes (279). Butler has devoted considerable attention to the impact that the naturalization of gender roles has on their acceptance and immunity from critique. “But some of those performative accomplishments claim the place of nature . . . , and they do this only by occluding the ways in which they are performatively established.” (209)

What happens then, when masculine gender norms such as strength, aggressiveness and toughness – widely perceived as natural or sex-given – are performatively challenged? When girls perform a gender that is not just powerful and

combative, but routinely more powerful and combative than a boy's? Mixed-sex wrestling provides a natural laboratory for the answer to that question.

In any athletic endeavor, practice is the backbone of the activity. It is the space where teams are built, skills are developed, and bodies are pushed. And it is here that women's involvement in mixed-sex sports has often been questioned. Fields has noted that a common objection to girl's participation in male-dominated sports has been the fear of diminished practices – the logical outcome if boys are forced to work with girls who are less physically able (109). A rare frustration of mine as a coach and parent has been the occasional difficulty Elise has had finding practice partners. While most of the boys have no difficulty pairing up with her, there have been some who do. However, it is in the parents' reactions to these instances where I have seen concrete resistance to the view that physical skill and strength are a natural male attribute.

One instance involved the case of a boy who, when paired with Elise by a coach, refused to practice with her. Immediately his father walked across the mat and threatened the boy with removal from practice if he did not work with Elise. The boy worked with her the remainder of the night. At the next practice, this father pulled me aside and told me that his son had received the best workout he had ever had practicing with Elise and had been so exhausted and sore that he had been unable to move when he got home. That boy has never again resisted practicing with Elise, or other girls on the team and in fact, often requests to work with her.

Another instance, less dramatic but equally compelling, was when a father of three boys on the team pulled me aside after practice and asked if I could occasionally pair one of his boys up with Elise. He was impressed by her intensity and skills during

practice, and wanted his son to benefit by working with that kind of partner. Elise's perspective on practice is that:

"It's when I get to make my moves better. I like partners who work hard and I hate it when I get a partner that won't really work."

When asked why she thinks that people notice how hard she practices, she simply shrugs and replies "*I don't know.*" What the instances above demonstrate, and Elise's own perspective reinforces, is that female performance of traditionally masculine qualities can be embraced and accepted.

Not surprisingly, however, not all reactions to the performance of female strength have been so well-received. Bryson has suggested that "Negative evaluations of women's capacities are implicit in the masculine hegemony in which sport is embedded" (48). If she is correct, then it stands to reason that the presumed masculinity of wrestling is important to the identity formation of many boy wrestlers, and to have that openly challenged by a girl is an unwanted, and potentially devastating disruption – to be physically bested by a supposedly weaker sex is a powerful challenge to a boy's sexed identity. For while it is one thing for a parent to recognize the concrete advantages to be gained by their son practicing with a skilled partner, it is another thing entirely for a boy whose very identity is based on the normalization of male strength to be physically bested by a girl. The title of this paper is based in part, off of a t-shirt that my family noticed the first time we attended a youth wrestling tournament. At that tournament we amusingly noticed a girl wrestler wearing a t-shirt between rounds that read "I Make the Boys Cry." The reality of her t-shirt has been born out again and again over the seasons as we witness girl wrestlers who defeat their boy opponents, with many of the boys leaving the

mat in tears. While any loss in wrestling is especially personal, and boys certainly cry after losing to other boys, the emotional pain these boys experience upon losing to a girl is a powerful reminder of the strong vested interests that are placed on gender norms, and the confusion and disappointment that result when those norms are violated.

From my journal, March 2006. At the regional tournament today, Elise won her division and became the regional champion. What made her victory especially sweet, however, was the last opponent she beat. Throughout the tournament Elise had had a boy in her grouping excessively trash-talking her, telling her to her face that she was not going to be able to beat him, because she was a girl. Such taunts had become increasingly common during this season, and Elise had understandably become more and more disturbed and distracted by them.

“He’d been mean to me all day – pointing at me, laughing to the other boys. He kept telling me he was going to beat me because I was a girl.”

Fortunately for her, this particular boy was not going to hit her until the final round, which gave us the opportunity to watch him. He favored using a sensational, but easily-counteracted throw that we proceeded to practice countering. As they lined up prior to the match, the boy continued to taunt her, and Elise tried to tune him out. As the match began, the boy tried the throw like we anticipated, and Elise easily blocked the move and took him down. In that moment it was as if somebody had flipped a switch – her confidence had returned, and his had disappeared. She went on to readily beat him 13-5. Not only was this her first tournament first place finish, but she had defeated her most sexist opponent! As I write this, however, I am troubled by gloating over this boy’s loss, especially

since a seven year old does not come to those attitudes by himself. I wonder, what are his parents and siblings telling him tonight?

Wrestling has afforded my daughter the opportunity to craft a body that in its very motion and activity violates gender norms. Her strength and physical prowess, especially when directly pitted and victorious over a boy's, visually and saliently deconstruct the supposed naturalness of male physical superiority. Yet what is interesting upon considering these incidents is the vast difference in the degrees of acceptance – the dispute is not over a female performing masculinity per se, but rather what the performance of those traits means. A fluid approach to gender, however, offers the potential to account for this. Luce Irigaray has noted that a fluid conceptualization of gender mandates a sensitivity to context. In describing fluids, Irigaray notes:

that it enjoys and suffers from a greater sensitivity to pressures; that it changes – in volume or in force, for example – according to the degree of heat; that it is, in its physical reality, determined by friction between two infinitely neighboring entities – dynamics of the near and not of the proper, movements coming from the quasi contact between two unities hardly definable as such. . . . ("Speculum" 111)

Drawing upon Irigaray, Marion Young has likewise emphasized that a process or fluid metaphysics requires the recognition that any location is dependent upon and inseparable from its surroundings. (Young 81) Elise's performance of non-traditional gender and the mixed reactions to that demonstrate that when considering gender, much like real estate, location is everything. In the context of athletic competition female performance of strength or aggressiveness is not a display of masculinity, but a display of athleticism, where such qualities are indisputably recognized as necessary and their enactment

actively encouraged. The venue of athletics thus provides a location where the female performance of what would otherwise be considered masculine behaviors is not necessarily viewed as an immediate threat to gender hierarchies. Yet even a subtle shift in location, from practice competition to tournament competition, from being a parent whose child is getting a good workout to being a parent whose child is being beaten by a girl in front of hundreds of spectators, is necessarily a change also in how a set of behaviors is coded as gendered.

The Symbolic Body of the Female Athlete

At whatever point Elise realized that her sex made her stand out in the sport of wrestling, wrestling came to have a symbolic value for her. As a coach and parent, the last thing I wanted was for my daughter to take on the role of symbolic female warrior in her matches – to have each win or loss be a statement about women’s capabilities. And in most instances, I do not believe that is the case – her wins and losses are simply that, wins and losses. And yet, a boy who taunts and ridicules her makes for especially sweet victories, or excessively sorrowful losses.

The athletic body itself is inherently symbolic. Considered within the framework of the traditional gender binary, the athletic body is the epitome of hegemonic masculinity. Within this traditional perspective sports represent the traditional male traits of autonomy, self-reliance and achievement (Hall 19), and combat sports in particular embody masculine values such as violence, aggression and toughness (Dunning). Within this context then the athletic male body comes to represent domination and control (Choi

9). Sloop has noted that in the instance of Brandon Teena, for example, his athleticism was continually presented as a signifier of his gender (64).

It is precisely this symbolic masculine value attached to the athletic body that has led to so much resistance for the female athlete. As earlier noted, because the athletic female body and its performative capabilities provide a visual and explicit challenge to the traditional gender binary, the body of the female athlete is a threat to that system. Choi has noted that in order to be accepted, female athletes must enact a hyper-femininity that demonstrates they are still available to men (85). In sports, as in other cultural arenas, the refusal or inability to abide by traditional gender norms often is read as a mark of lesbianism.

This creates a peculiar tension: The growing popularity of women's sport hinges on the athlete's success in reassuring the public that, however exceptional her athletic talents, she is in all respects a "normal" woman. The lesbian athlete, with her reputation for masculine style, body type, and desire, represents a refusal to issue this assurance (Cahn 265).

Indeed, as girls began to make headway into wrestling in the late eighties and nineties, the symbolic threat of lesbianism was a frequent reason given for precluding girl's involvement in the sport (Fields 116).

Of course the fear of an overly masculine body is only one half of the social fears about the athletic female body that female athletes must face. Female athletes, especially those in high-contact sports like hockey, football or wrestling, must deal with a stereotype on the opposite end of the spectrum from the "mannish" body – the belief in an inherently fragile or delicate female body. Many opponents of girls participation in

wrestling voice a concern about girls being hurt or injured by stronger or more powerful boys. While the fact that wrestlers are divided up into weight classes (so that no wrestler competes against a significantly larger wrestler) would seem to mitigate such concerns, this would only hold true if the bodies in question were seen as equal. For those who believe that the female body is naturally less strong, less durable, or less tough than a male body, the bracketing of weight classes offer no protection.

This fear for the fragile female body is evident, for example, in the documentary film *Girl Wrestler*. The film follows 13 year old Tara Neal through her final year of being allowed to wrestle boys under Texas wrestling regulations. Throughout the film various athletes, coaches and parents are interviewed regarding their thoughts on co-ed youth wrestling, and at several points throughout the film concerns about girls being hurt by boys were voiced. John Rizzuti, president of the Texas Wrestling Officials Association, was quoted as saying “Hell will freeze over before I officiate girls being brutalized by guys. What in heaven’s name are parents teaching these girls when they want to jump into the ring with these brutes?” (Zander) An anonymous boy wrestler similarly noted “I don’t think girls should wrestle against guys so we don’t feel obligated to go easy on them.” (Zander)

These sentiments, of course, are not shared by most female athletes (Theberge "Higher Goals") nor borne out by research on sports injury rates. (Young and White 108-126) Nor are they shared by Elise, in spite of a rather ominous start to her wrestling career. At the age of six Elise entered her first wrestling tournament and was able to wrestle three matches. Halfway through her second match, the official stopped the match when blood was spotted. The injury turned out to be one of Elise’s teeth that had been

knocked loose. Although it was a very loose baby tooth waiting to come out, the incident still flustered the official who necessarily was concerned with her health. During the injury time out Elise insisted that she wanted to continue wrestling, and so she asked her coach to hold her tooth (to save it for the tooth fairy) and went back out onto the mat, because, as she noted, *“I’m having too much fun and I’m almost winning.”* In later conversations about wrestling and injuries and how much she is or is not concerned about them, she observed:

“Sometimes if I have a loose tooth I’m a little creeped out, but not really. I don’t like the match being stopped, if I’m ahead or I’m going to pin him and then all of a sudden they stop it. But no, I don’t worry about getting hurt.”

That the female body itself is already inscribed with conflicted meanings before any athlete even dons a uniform is a testament to the Catch-22 that female athletes face. Social acceptance of female athletes depends on the individual athlete’s ability to walk a knife edge between a body that is read as excessively masculine and a body that is too feminine to compete. And yet the physical markings of gender on the body offer insights into how these tensions are addressed in the reality of lived experience.

The physical body of a girl wrestler is a visible marker of fluid gender – an always-shifting canvas upon which the girl can display herself as she chooses. At officially-sanctioned USA Wrestling matches, all wrestlers wear nearly identical gear when competing – a small thin wrestling shoe, a singlet (a skin-tight nylon suit running from above the knees to straps over the shoulders) and a head-gear to protect the ears. Because wrestlers are not allowed to compete with hair past the shoulders, those with long hair must wear it tucked up inside the headgear, often underneath a thin skull-cap or

liner. I mention the typical wrestling gear only because of the impact it has on the visible display of the wrestlers' sex. When a wrestler steps onto the mat to wrestle, it is frequently difficult to tell if the competitor is a boy or girl. It is increasingly common for boys to wear their hair long and for girls to wear their hair shorter, so that the presence or absence of a skull-cap under the headgear is a sign devoid of meaning. Likewise, for girls developed enough to have breasts, sports bras flatten the breasts so much that the girls lack the rounded shape that might otherwise distinguish them from boys. Add to this the fact that girls who have competed for several years have developed muscles, in particular strong upper-bodies, and the end result is that the competitive athlete's gender is not nearly as clearly marked as it might normally be.

As a result, the visible presentation of these girls is constantly shifting. On the mat, the wrestler is often androgynous. But as soon as a competitor steps off the mat, and the ponytail comes cascading out of the headgear and a pink t-shirt goes on, a slightly more traditional femininity is suddenly on display. And yet it is a femininity that is sweaty, perhaps bleeding, and still flush from strenuous activity. Young reminds us that to take gender as fluid seriously is to recognize that "Fluids, unlike objects, have no definite borders; they are unstable, which does not mean they are without pattern."

(Young 80) Thus it is not that these girls move between performances of masculinity and femininity, as much as that what masculinity or femininity are in the first place is much less stable than we choose to acknowledge and hence much less discrete than we tend to recognize.

There is, I believe, a pleasure to be had in being able to adroitly perform a fluid gender. Toward the end of her third season, Elise and I attended a "Daddy-Daughter"

dance sponsored by the local recreation department. Of course a part of this entailed Elise dressing up and the two of us going out for a nice dinner. Elise and her mother spent time curling her hair and doing her nails and I made sure that she had a small corsage on before we departed. At the restaurant we bumped into a family from the wrestling team, whose two boys were teammates of Elise's and the father an assistant coach. The double-takes that these teammates gave Elise upon seeing her in a dress with her hair done up were obvious, and Elise of course basked in the compliments. Shortly thereafter I teased her about her obvious pleasure at being "a little princess" and she explained

"I like being pretty, but I don't get to be pretty when I wrestle, so it was fun to have them see me when I was dressed pretty and nice. I think they were really surprised to see me in a dress."

While the glow on her face eclipsed her words, her pleasure in being able to perform a very traditional femininity was obvious. The reception of this fluid gender, however, is varied, and the social pressure to possess a body that is not read as excessively masculine is significant. The importance of enacting a symbolically "safe" female masculinity was affirmed for me last year when a father on the team was talking to me about a poster in the practice room. The poster in question was of the 2005 All-American high school girl wrestlers. Our conversation had been about the acceptance of girls into the sport, and this father in particular, a huge fan of the sport, was adamant that girls deserved full opportunity. In the course of discussing some of the different problems that people had with girls wrestling, the issue of what wrestling did to the girls' femininity was raised. The father referred to the poster in question, using it as support for the fact that "these girls are great athletes, but they still look like girls. Hell, most of them are really pretty."

It was impossible to argue with him for the girls depicted, by and large, would be considered very attractive by most people. The girls' appearance was emphasized in part because the poster displayed the young women both in their wrestling gear and their street clothes, allowing for them to be seen at once in multiply gendered depictions. Yet I found myself wondering that night, why it was that their appearance was so important? I cannot think of a single conversation I have ever heard where the impact of a sport on a boy's appearance was an issue. I believe that successful female athletes, especially those who excel in traditionally male sports like wrestling, are indeed a significant threat to traditional gender binaries.

The reassurance offered by these girls' appearance is not so much an effort to defend or maintain gender binaries (which such emphasis invariably does) as it is a reflection of where a fluid gender runs into socially-set limits. As already noted, on the mat a girl wrestler's gender, as marked both by her body and her behaviors, is very fluid. Within this setting her appearance and actions are less likely to be viewed as nonconforming with traditional gender expectations because they conform with the prevalent athletic expectations. But change the venue and remove the athletic expectations, and the behaviors and appearance must change accordingly to receive social sanctioning. Irigaray has recognized that within a traditionally object-centered perspective fluidity is a frightening excess because it eludes easy manageability and provides neither solidity nor firmness (Irigaray "This Sex" 237) and Young has suggested that part of the mixed social acceptance of breasts and nipples is precisely the fluid nature of breasted experience. (83)

For a Fluid Conceptualization of Gender

“Theory is an activity that does not remain restricted to the academy. It takes place every time a possibility is imagined, a collective self-reflection takes place, a dispute over values, priorities, and language emerges” (Butler “Undoing” 175-6). Elise’s involvement in youth wrestling exemplifies precisely such a tussle over meanings and values that incrementally constructs theory. Throughout this essay I have attempted to demonstrate the myriad ways in which Elise’s performance of wrestling has been interpreted, constructed, and deconstructed as a means of both making sense of and reconstructing gender and sex roles. Butler cautions, however, that one must distinguish between enabling and disabling gender norm violations (“Undoing” 214). Clearly, not all gender role violations are empowering, and our culture is amazingly adept at containing and reframing gender norm trespasses (Sloop). And yet, I insist on suggesting female athletic performance possesses significant potential to radically restructure gender Discourse.

Athletic competition, based as it is on the assumption of a level playing field, contains within itself the symbolic resources for deconstructing gender and sex binaries. For women’s and girls’ success on this supposed level playing field, especially in those instances where that success is in direct competition against males, is a powerful and direct deconstruction of hegemonic femininity. And there has been no shortage of female athletic success. In 1985 America Morris received national acclaim by becoming the first girl to pin a boy. Two decades later, in 2006, Michaela Hutchinson garnered the same

attention by becoming the first girl to win an open high school state championship in Alaska. Sandwiched between these two events has been the women's dominance of the 1996 Olympic games, the 1999 U.S. Women's World Cup victory, the stabilization of the WNBA, and the first female to play in a 1A collegiate football game in 2002. For the United States in the twenty-first century "athleticism for women now seems normal, part of girls' and women's everyday lives rather than the lives of the exceptional few" (Heywood and Dworkin xx). It is the familiarity, the ubiquity, and the acceptability of female athletic involvement that has reconstituted gender Discourse. To be strong, aggressive and competitive is now a socially-sanctioned component of being a woman in at least one very visible and accepted arena.

On a more intimate level, however, the disruption to gender normative behavior that athletic competition provides can tip toward the side of empowerment. Elise's experiences demonstrate that even in the face of resistance, of a refusal by others to accept her gender performance, to disidentify with her female power (or to use Halberstam's language, her female masculinity), she has been able to create a gender identity that fits her and her desires. It would seem that the resistance Elise has encountered has only contributed to a budding feminist awareness as well as a loosening and radical redefinition of what constitutes normal gendered behavior. "Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized" (Butler "Bodies" 4).

In attempting to situate wrestling within her gender identity, Elise has latched onto the terminology of "men's work" and "women's work" to account for the resistance

she has noticed to girl wrestlers. Yet while her terminology clearly draws upon the traditional gender binaries, when asked, she readily identifies wrestling as in fact, “women’s work.”

They think it’s disrespectful for a girl to win. Maybe they think in their beliefs that because more men than women do it, that women should just do women’s work and not be strong.

“Do you think wrestling is women’s work?”

Yes.

It is no surprise that an eight-year-old girl who has participated for several years in such a traditionally male sport readily uses gender binaries to account for her place in the sport and the resistance that she has encountered. Her remarks demonstrate the limits and traps of language, for in trying to justify her violation of gender roles, she is forced to draw upon, and thus reinforce, the very gender binaries upon which her ostracization is founded. Elise lacks, in other words, the linguistic tools with which she can situate herself without reinforcing the very system she intuitively finds as unfair and illogical.

Yet in spite of such difficulties, in the face of such firmly entrenched linguistic and cultural gender walls, Elise has nonetheless found the resources with which to create a legitimate place for herself in the sport. By reinscribing the sport of wrestling as appropriate women’s work, Elise has found a way to make an activity that she enjoys consonant with her self-understanding as a girl.

There is, I would argue, a strong history of such disidentification with regulatory gender norms already well-established in athletic competition. Traditionally feminine qualities such as compassion, empathy, encouragement, and support are an integral part

of athletics. If such a claim seems absurd at first glance, it is only because in athletics these qualities have been decoupled from gender. We instead recognize these qualities as integral components of good sportsmanship and being a good teammate; the qualities have been renamed within the realm of athletics, and in so doing, have been readily embraced as qualities that it is expected for boys and men to exhibit. The role that naming plays in the social acceptability of specific traits in sports has long been recognized (Rivers 121), yet it continues to be critical in recognizing the impact of athletic performance in opening up and restructuring gender Discourse. To the extent that any girl or woman views certain traits as masculine, they are less likely to embrace them or see their involvement in athletics as transformative or situated within a broader framework. (Wedgwood 140-162)

Yet there are obvious limits to the social impact of the fluid presentation of gender that athletic competition offers. As noted throughout this essay the acceptance of any given gender performance is dependent upon the context within which it takes place. Precisely because athletic competition offers a venue where the performance of a fluid gender is valued, what is being celebrated by female athleticism is not necessarily the challenge to gender norms, but the embracement of athletic norms. The ease with which tensions arise when these same gender performances are moved out of an athletic venue suggest that a fluid gender is still very much non-conforming in many situations and that as soon as a fluid gender is seen as non-conforming it is actively disciplined.

Obviously the resources that any child has available to negotiate their sense of gender vary tremendously from each person to the next. Slight variations in those resources – a team that simply wouldn't allow her to compete, teammate animosity or indifference, no support from friends or family – would make it much more difficult, if

not impossible, for her to not only compete, but to do so in a way that made sense within any understanding of gender or sex. Yet the ability to wield these resources, even by an eight-year-old, demonstrates the potential that such gender normative disruptions have on challenging and reconfiguring the dominant gender and sex binaries.

Obviously, a study such as this, based heavily on one person's experiences, cannot be extrapolated to all female athletes. It can, however, demonstrate the emancipatory potential for female athletes who defy traditional norms of femininity and demonstrate the possible routes through which empowerment can be found. Somewhere between unbridled optimism and hopeless cynicism, lies an ability for girls and women to intentionally and meaningfully craft an identity that while requiring tremendous work, allows them to create an identity that works as they need it to work – providing a space to perform the gender they want with the sex that they are in a way congruent with their self-understanding. At the same time, the emergence of these expanded gender identities, multiplied out female athlete upon female athlete, lays the foundation for a mass performance of female strength, power, and control that offers promising potential. The future possibilities for that promise, and the direction it might take, are a story yet untold.

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